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НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ
18+

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The Ficuses in the Open

«ЛитРес: Самиздат»
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This here artifact is an attempt at honestly depicting the besieged Stepanakert town in winter 1992 when physical survival was the foremost objective common to all.Содержит нецензурную брань.

Содержание

Introduction

Although the number of *personae dramatis* is pretty limited—they are just a family and their closest relatives and neighbors as well as a pinch of colleagues from the demised establishment, and though the action mostly consist of monotonous household chores, this here artifact is an attempt at honestly depicting the besieged Stepanakert town in winter 1992 when physical survival was the foremost objective common to all.

All that was so abysmally long ago that
no conceivable reason remains to suss output
if all that was exactly that way
or differently,
or at all…
it makes no difference now

Month one

December 4, morning

The night was quite serene, even the machine-guns up there in the Krkjan part of the town kept pregnant silence…

The day before yesterday I dropped into Department Store to pick some present for Roozahna on her birthday. She turned one decade old.

In all the murky void of the Department Store only 2 customers— a man brought his son to the toy-department for the kid to see sunny side in the current snafu.

The sullen saleswoman placed on the counter a dozen of random picks from the rows of plastic clones lined over the shelves at any Department Store in any Soviet city for years.

'Anything else, jahna?' asked Daddy.

There was no answer just a listless gaze of the boy at the magnanimous yet useless deathbed sweepstake.

(…rub your shoulders with the Grim Reaper for a while, and you become a spendthrift…)

Even in Maxim, the Chief Editor of *The Soviet Karabakh*, the one and only paper in this here Autonomous Region, there cropped up somewhat extravagant streaks. Stately strolling, to and fro, in front of his subordinate gents, Wagrum and Lenic, who in the attitude of wisely eager beavers sat at attention at their respective office desks, he cared to proclaim, 'To stick it out down here, to see it through thick and thin is the uniquest opportunity for a journalist.' To spiff that piece of wisdom up with a ring of ponderosity, he jingled his regal bunch of keys dangling from his fatty hands in the constant clasp over his mighty butt.

My backache loyally sticks by me, and the shortness of Lydia's sofa makes me feel it even in sleep… Yesterday, I rummaged through her bookshelves and—wow! what a catch!—there's *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* in Russian for which reason I picture myself pouring over the volume tonight on that shortie of a sofa.

Same day, evening

It's hard to say if it's a snowy rain or a rainy snow outdoors. Our kitchen tap yields just a needle-thick trickle, yet yields.

In the morning, I had one more job interview with Arcadic, the Head of Russian Section (and pretty bold already), at this uniquest paper in the town.

Keeping, in a well-trained manner, his eyes elsewhere, he trotted out that the periodical did need my professional skills and the coming week would see me in the position of a renderer, after all of unavoidable managerial chicanery and staff-reshuffle castlings would get seen to to create a vacancy. There's no way to accelerate the process, you know.

From my current standpoint (which as always is here and now) the employment still looks like a pretty far off pie in the sky, but when jobless practice your patience, buddy.

In the afternoon, Sahtik sent me to fetch a jar of milk from the Milk Factory. Coming there, I found neither Valyo nor any one at all who I knew. To skip the unavoidable schlepping of the empty jar back and bringing it over again after a better-timed arrangement, I just stashed it away in a quite quiet nook, hanging the bag with the jar up on the back side of the eternally open door to the always dark corridor on the second floor in the Administration Block. Not a chance, anyone would ever nose it out. Eternity handlers are too rare a specimen in this here cut-and-run world. Undisturbed and unseen will the bagged jar hang on the unvexed door handle till my next visitation, betcha.

Later in the day the Lydia's husband Nerses, arriving from his native village of Hnushinak, tap-tapped from the street onto the matte-glazed window pane in our one-but-spacious-room flat. With that window open you can talk through the grates or pass things to a person standing on the sidewalk. The other two windows in the room are simply nailed up… He wanted the key from their house.

'Oh, sure, here you are!'

Now, his return to the town ended my career of a security at their place. Fare thee well, *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA*, and thee as well, O, Procrustean sofa!

My backache faithfully lingers by, however, tonight I'm in the luck, the kitchen tap had trickled almost two pails of water before it was completely cut.

December 5.

At walking, the backache aggravates, especially in the morning, more so when walking downhill…

When at the Milk Factory I entered the Director's office, Valyo was yelling on the phone at the top of his lungs to share that the town had run out of flour, so the Bread Factory down here was stopped four days before. Then he rang off and, in a lower tone, told me that there was no milk either.

Fortunately, when I stepped out of the Milk Factory gate, Sashic was passing by his car and pulled up for me to hop in as he was heading uphill to the downtown. There I walked to the paper's 2-storied Editorial Building where Ms. Stella, the Responsible Secretary, handed me two articles to be translated into Russian.

Albeit authored by different names they were remarkably alike—Patriotic Jarring Rattle of an Empty Oil-Drum rolled along all bumps and pot-holes. I went at both articles hammer and tongs to render their double din to Russian.

Being (technically) a startup oddball, I occupied the vacant desk whose sitter was on her pregnancy leave. Wagrum, a reporter at the Russian Section, fluttered in, perched onto his desk, and shared his utmost surprise at all this crying shame of procrastination at my inauguration to the position of Renderer. Some stupid bureaucratic tricks, you know. A monkey business for kids!. And he took wing again.

A sudden close burst of a protracted salvo made me startle and started off my individual response caused by the like occurrences.

It feels like the combination of a sudden whop of heat upshooting through the abdomen to chest and of a piercing grip at the back of my neck—splashclutch!—and when the sensation reaches its peak, the grip slowly slackens and kinda dissolves together with the inaudible fizzle of receding heat-wave.

(…too many words, buddy. Put it straight, 'I got scared stiff and felt all funny, full of butterflies in my stomach.'…)

As it turned out, the salvo was to style up the funeral of the four youths killed by a single shell in their dugout in Krkjan, the Azeri part of the town on the commanding height in the the northwestern outskirts…

When I came home from the paper, Valyo's kids, Sego and Gaia, were on a visit to our place. Sahtik and I played cards with them, the childish game of 'believe-or-not'. Roozahna—still under punitive restrictions after the latest of her pranks—was not allowed to participate and bravely took her medicine, sticking around in the role of a scornful on-looker.

The game was put off and the little party cheered up by the arrival of Sashic's wife, Carina, with their boy and girl, and also with a present for our Ahshaut – some hand-me-down footwear from her son Tiggo. All went on as merrily as the marriage bells until an hour later Sashic pulled up and honked by the communicational window to pick up all of our guests.

At 10 pm, Sahtik and the kids started for the Shelter, a former tailor's in the ground floor of a dingy two-storied apartment block a little bit up this street. The room enjoys swell popularity in the neighborhood because its only window is not facing the heights from where they shoot *Alazan* missiles at the town. About dozen of women with two or three kids each spend nights in that 6 by 6 meter room.

In the darkness I saw my family over to the Shelter carrying Ahshaut in my arms. It was a talkless walk under the snappy din of shooting out in Krkjan, beneath the indifferently gleaming stars above. We proceeded slowly in time to the slumber breathing of the child wrapped in his blanket and pressed to my chest full of bitter mute butterflies in my heart.

December 6, morning

Starting at midnight, for about two hours I tread, to and fro, the sidewalk—a too lofty term for all the ruts and holes and the crooked tree roots all too ready to trip you by their bulges through the crumbled asphalt—and carried water home with a couple of pails 'cause my missus's in the mind for a cap-tail washing. Up and down.

Down—to the Three Taps beneath the huge bass-relief of comic-tragic masks behind the Theater. Up—back to our kitchen where all the containers in our household waited a-gape to get their fill. In and out.

The dog-eat-dog gunfire kept swelling up in Krkjan—up and down the entire slope—bazooka booms, now and then. To and fro.

At one of my downs, I marked across the road, right opposite to our three windows, silent forms in white garbs contrasting ghostly to the darkness. They lugged a couple of drums, polished metal a-glitter under the lamppost, from the upper in the Twin Bakeries to its twin, 10 meters down the street. Seems like, my mother-in-law's gossip that they've air-lifted by choppers some flour down here came from a reliable source. Up and down.

On the back porch of the Theater, a group of men stood chatting and smoking. An unfriendly, split-up loner descended to the foot of the stairs to have a reefer all to himself. In and out.

Nearing the Three Taps for the damnteenth time, I met a couple of guys staggering in counter-direction. 'Hey, bro,' a husky voice thickly slurred in Russian, 'don't go there. They shoot.'

A split second later, the warning was confirmed by a stray bullet from Krkjan that whipped the crossroad by the Three Taps. 'Oh!' commented the males in the lee of the Theater.

About four in the morning, the town was pervaded by such an incredible calm that Sahtik and my mother-in-law left the Shelter to bring the kids home… The mother-in-law shared the news of a twenty-year-old youth killed tonight in Krkjan fighting.

The same day, evening

About 11 am, I took Chief for a walk to the central park… A sunny day under the pale blue sky. Motionless waves of the hills snoozing in the late autumn's haze. The empty alleys in the park under the thick rag of fallen leaves—withered, brittle, whispering at each of your steps… The ever-present gunfire—distant, yet strident.

Leaving the park, we met Yuri, a co-owner and part-time attendee in the video games pavilion by the park's entrance stairs, now closed, no customers for digital shooters.

That's an unmistakable small shop-keeper, oriental and plump, all sweet smiles and blissful squints because of being so happy to meet you. A single handshake from his embracing palms—soft and full of immense tenderness—is enough to send your train of thoughts straight to Orgasm Terminal. (What the hell did he get married for?)

After exchanging the custom regards and greetings, he presented me with one more puzzling enigma when bowed down to Chief and kissed his hand for a good-bye…

Chief and I crossed the circle of mighty pines within the ring road of Piatachok and were sauntering up Lenin Street when I noticed Galyo descending in a group of four. He acknowledged me with a wink. Returning from their night shift of shooting in Krkjan, I suppose. Though his pals looked more like peasants than gunmen.

Till August Galyo and I worked at the same state organization, SMU-8, constructing a pipeline in the Mountainous Karabakh, but then big shots from the CPSU Central Committee took power in

Moscow. Next morning at work, I handed in the application to fire me by my volition because I don't want work for the state ruled by those clowns. They laughed at the administration, yet conceded. In a couple of days the SCUS putsch in Moscow was put out but I stayed jobless. That's when I started to raise walls of our future house… When the walls were finished and the general situation in Stepanakert grew grim, my mother-in-law advised me to look for a job at the local newspaper, as I was such a book-worm. She and the Head Editor bore the same family names and were from the same village of Harav…

We walked as far as the Corner Shop and at the news stall by it I bought a Russian copy of the local daily with my maiden rendering on page 4 – a whoopee feature by a self-assigned literary critic to trumpet in one-horse-burg style a skinny booklet of patriotic rhymes turned out by a local poet (seated in the next office down the corridor) as the greatest achievement of the poetry alive.

All the day long the crowd, queuing at the Twin Bakeries, buzzed and shrieked just opposite the three windows of our one-but-spacious-room flat.

Already at dusk, Valyo tapped from the sidewalk onto the pane in our communicational window to hand in the jar which I left at the Milk Factory. Full of milk now.

It's five past eight pm and quiet so far.

December 7.

At 3 am the whopping detonations in the lower parts of the town frightened Roozahna out of her bed and into a fit of uncontrollable tremor. Sahtik could hardly talk her into keeping calm. Before six in the morning two more *Alazan*

volleys ripped up the night. Ahshaut slept soundly through everything.

At dawn roaring monsters get back to their lairs replaced by screaming humans as those in the two noisy crowds scrambling at the Twin Bakeries just opposite the three inadmissibly large windows of our one-but-spacious-room flat. All day long the fluctuations in their squash-and-shout made kinda sea roll background to our domestic affairs.

Carina and Orliana, Valyo's wife, called in to leave their children at our place. Sahtik joined her two sisters and they went out to pay the last tribute to the demised first headmistress of them all (at the respective intervals, of course). The old lady lived next door to their mother's and died of natural causes.

I visited the Building Site of our future house to collect a bagful of apples and an armful of tree roots chopped off at digging foundation trenches before I started laying walls. Since August, they got dry enough for the tomorrow's barbecue.

On my way there I saw a pair of Soviet Army armor-vehicles bowling busily along, each one decked with a squad of 5 to 7 soldiers. The braves had black warpaint on their mugs, the combat smear applied in quantities reflecting their personal preferences—from a finger-thick mud masks over the whole visage up to a soft touch or two at the cheekbones. Tastes differ. Yet, no one escaped the pre-mission swarzenneggerization, not even their captain in a civilian knitted hat. On they rolled past the gazing sidewalks, obviously wallowing in the public attention.

If some complete stranger to here and now saw us dawdling along or going about our daily chores amid the ever-present din of assault rifles in Krkjan he'd take us for a town of deaf. Yet, don't be fooled by our out-of-place looks, Mr. Stranger, we do hear the enraged rounds and each of us has some kind of their inner funny feeling…

By 9 pm it turned completely quiet. Some creepy quietness.

May it be, I'm too strict to Roozahna?

December 8

Yesterday at 11 pm, Sahtik had to bring Ahshaut back home: he couldn't sleep in the Shelter because of another babe crying in the same room. She left him with me and went back to Roozahna who gets funky when in a strange crowd alone.

From midnight till one am, I again was bringing water from the Three Taps: Sahtik's capital washing is still in progress.

My legs got used to navigating on their own over the serrations in the sidewalk terrain, letting me enjoy the quietude of the night. No shooting at all. How sweet the peace is!

(…as sweet as a piss after six cans of bitter beer…)

At dawn two mighty explosions in Armenavan – another uphill neighborhood next to Krkjan. The bangs did not disturb Ahshaut, he slept on bravely… Later in the morning, the two of us had a walk to the Bazaar to buy some herbs for the today's feast – synchronized celebration of Roozahna's (almost a week after the proper date) and Ahshaut's (upcoming in a fortnight) birthdays.

The usual feasting team of sisters-with-husbands-with-children turned up for the event as well as our landlord and lady, Armo and Nasic, respectively, and three their children.

The mother-in-law was not present, attending the funeral of the late neighbor – headmistress of all of her three daughters.

Now, it's half-past-eleven. Sahtik and Roozahna have gone to the Shelter. Ahshaut is left to sleep home tonight.

Silence outdoors.

December 9

The night was shattered by bombardments: seven volleys of six to ten Alazan

missiles each were shot at different hours… A missile from the second volley exploded fairly near to our place. There followed a stretch of deafening silence in the street followed by hasty footsteps and agitated male voices. 'Where? How?'

A not too distant voice called out, 'Hit here!'

Ahshaut slept okay through all the night.

Stretched on my bed, I followed through the matte glass in the panes of our three—so absurdly wide!—windows the languid flame traces of *Alazans* flying towards their earsplitting crash.

During a lull between the attacks, I had a oddly long dream.

...the bombardment's over I'm coming back home through the raw rays of rising sun midst a silent crowd going the same way and an old women—dark and strange—asks me to help and at once puts a girl of nine on my back to carry along I catch the legs of the kid bestriding me and feel through her brittle stockings that her left leg is cut at the knee and the oldie plods after me assuring her dear Ira-girl that now all's gonna be all right and when we part I enter our room just in time to hear Sahtik's call from the kitchen that I have a visitor and going over there I'm confronted with a close-up of a hen spread out on the asphalt floor with its head chopped off a second before and the bird wriggles its neck ending with a pulpy ringlet of raw meat while the girl that I carried along stands by and she turns up to me the smile on her face shadowed by lank bangs of her dark straight hair falling over the brow to her eye-sockets where instead of eyes only seamless patches of pinch-tight skin...

It's a quarter to 10 am, the night is over, Ahshaut is playing with his wooden blocks. Sahtik has dropped in and stepped out to ring up her sisters. Roozahna, reportedly, sleeps in the Shelter.

My mother-in-law went to her work place to wash the floors there, which, actually, is her job.

Same day, evening

At 11 am I turned up at my soon-to-be work place just to find the renderers' locked up. I went upstairs to Ms. Stella's office room who informed me there was no stuff for translations.

Back at home, Sahtik announced her intention to take the kids to the downhill part of the town and shelter for the night in the basement of Orliana's apartment block.

A senseless plan if I were asked, yet I preferred to keep my humble opinion to myself in the hope that the long walk and change of place and doing something—however senseless it might seem —would do her more good than just sitting and waiting for nothing good.

Then Sahtik spoke of her funny feeling when scared suddenly. She feels an icy curd that starts up inside her and gets tighter and tighter until it gets real hard.

(…quite contrary to the heat decompression of my innards after the splashclutch…)

We set off through the autumnal drizzle never letting up all this day.

Roozahna mouthed off nonstop about missiles, shelters and stuff until Sahtik, shedding off her despondent meditation, ordered her shut up. My seized up back grumbled under the weight of the bag with victuals and kids' clothes, so I kept silent too and only Ahshaut bubbled up with joy at having an all-out walk and now and then issued yells of delight…

Walking back alone, I was as slow-go as the ceaseless rain itself. Yet, a couple of times the sun peeped through the clouds to perk me up and set the tiny raindrops a-glitter. By the Department Store I met my former workmates at the gas pipeline constructing firm, a couple of horny-palmed lads of Baluja village. Vartan asked if I had enrolled a phedayee

group and by his up-palmed hand he kinda sawed across his chest alluding to my beard.

'No,' said I, 'I have not, and beards can't be privatized by guerrillas as their league badge as long as both artists and drifters have the time-honored right to sport it.'

Further uphill I encountered Murad, a KRUZ truck driver, barging down along the sidewalk as any mortal biped, he did it as bulkily as his bull-truck. We just halloed each other.

One block higher, at the next crossing, I exchanged a courtly nod with Guiro, a gaffer from SMU-8, hanging uselessly around—a white-collar remains a white collar—on the opposite side of Kirov Street.

Near the Theater I was saluted by a group of my former pupils from the Seidishen Village School. They looked like adolescents already because of that fluffy down on their upper lips. Kids can't but grow up. These village boys are growing up into a war.

At 8 pm I went out to make a call to the Orliana's on the payphone round the corner. No one was over there to answer. Everybody's gone down to the basement shelter, I guess.

Half an hour later I had a supper with my mother-in-law. Then she left for the Shelter. A mattress and blanket stay there on a permanent basis to stake off the sleeping-place.

December 10

It was a hard day's night and through my sleep I heard only one missile attack (they say there were more) followed by the too loud bangs of the legitimate artillery guns fired from the Soviet Army garrison next to the Upper Park. Retaliating for a maverick *Alazan* missile?

I fell back to sleep and had a loathsome dream of sticking it in but feeling nothing, neither felt she (who?!) and didn't care a pin to conceal her resentment. What was my wrongdoing to be punished by means of so scalping a nightmare?

At noon, I ventured to the Orliana's to take Sahtik and the kids back. Heading downhill, I dropped into the Theater to participate in the referendum on independence for this here country. Sahtik voted on our way back.

(…so, we did it on the road… Anybody saw us?…)

At 3 pm, the so-long-and-eagerly-craven-for event took place in the Chief Editor's office: Maxim signed my job application. Starting tomorrow, I (nominally) am a sidekick reporter at the local newspaper but actually in charge of Armenian-Russian translations because throughout its glorious history *The Soviet Karabakh* was always bilingual, vernacular issues duplicated in Russian for the Big Brother to check their consistency with the current imperial course. This wise provision allowed me to kiss good-bye my being unemployed and embrace the position of a translator for the following 3 weeks, till January 1, and then (quoting Maxim) – 'as God will dispose'.

After that concluding invocation, I left his office and on my way home paid attention to the noise in the streets.

'You should've seen' a Soviet Army officer said to his mate marching along, 'what mess that *Alazan's* made of my hotel room'.

In the next couple of gossips—a half block nearer to our flat—a Russian military officer's wife with a finger-thick mask of makeup responded to her companion, 'Yeah, I agree!' loud and shrill, so as to drive it home to the passers-by how readily she can agree.

From 4 pm till half past 8, I was fixing up a basement compartment in the 5-story apartment block over the crossroad by the Twin Bakeries.

The musty air in the cemented catacombs moved in a busy stir, the buzz of voices, rasping of a hand saw, hammers knocking, men ferrying through the trunk corridor in the basement pails of rubble and litter out of their would-be shelters.

One of the compartments though was overlooked by shelter-seekers. My mother-in-law conveyed the intelligence to Sahtik and, consequently, I was instructed to go and see to it.

I went over and found the mentioned compartment, dark and silent. A flickering match disclosed the mains running loosely along the bare concrete walls. I went home after a bulb, attached it to the mains and in its steady light turned about to have a look. The view made me give out a tiny whistle of comprehension. Now, it was clear why no one had staked a claim to the room. Some dreadful lump of work had to be done to carve out a relatively habitable place in that 6 by 6 meter room filled up to the ceiling with heaps of discarded ventilation fragments, boxes, tins, bottles, bits and pieces of all descriptions, earth, masonry blocks, worn-out tires and suchlike whatnots.

The fluffy layers of black dust coated the landscape, cobweb festoons sagged copiously, criss-cross, to bring the picture to utmost perfection… So it was the only compartment to choose from.

(…poor Robinson Crusoe! How could you possibly come to this!…)

After two hours of concentrated efforts all of the sizable objects and things were copulated into each other and stacked up into one half of the room. At that point arrived the reinforcement – our landlord Armo together with his son Arthur, a boy in his late teens, and Romah, the adopted son of a single mother living next door to Armo's house. Normally, they all took refuge in the cellar under the floor in our one-but-spacious room, descending there by steep flight of stairs directly from the yard.

Sahtik rallied them by advertising the advantages of an underground basement shelter where the din of explosions is almost inaudible and where the ceiling is made of reinforced concrete slabs and not of inch-thick planks.

Armo took to shoveling the earth and litter into pails, the rest of us—the two boys and I—were taking it out. By our concentrated shock-work, we freed a place enough for half a dozen cots and a table. Then the women came and swept the concrete floor, hung some blankets and old rags to screen off the trash-store in the other half of the room and it acquired a look of a sufficient war-time shelter.

It's half past 10 pm, all of my family are over there now.

Armo, the landlord, ducked out of moving to the block's basement room because his wife, on her second thoughts, balked at the idea and lined him up into sticking to their accustomed place. Yes, a cellar under the floorboards is not as safe as a shelter in the basement, yet down here she queens over those of her neighbors who, having no cellars of their own, seek refuge in hers. Locking them out altogether is inconceivable in the present situation and equally unthinkable to leave the cellar with her jams and pickles entirely to the neighbors' mercy.

It is a still and starry night outdoors. The muffled chitchat of the shelterers preparing for their night repose is heard from under the scraped floorboards in our one-but-spacious room.

Good night, everybody.

December 11

The night turned out not too good for me, instead of sound sleep canceling all the troubles, I got stuck in oozy insomnia.

At 6 in the morning, a major missile attack broke loose from all the quarters. Severe bombardments were repeated each two-three hours today.

At 9 sharp I was in the Editorial House to fill in the forms for my employment. There chanced to be only Ms. Rita, the Secretary of Chief Editor. Her another position is that of Acting Personnel Manager when not making coffee for Boss and his visitors.

Hardly had we started the action when a close round of *Alazan* blasts prompted her to apologize and take a hasty leave. I stayed alone in the whole building and, because the Renderers' Room was locked, I kept sitting next to the Boss' office door in Rita's office-kitchen-anteroom.

At twenty-past-ten, Wagrum triumphantly pranced in. Know what? An videocassette sprang out of his pocket. See, eh? The interview he recorded the day before with a Deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet on a visit down here. Max in his office? (Let him know what a champ of a reporter works for this paper!)

A sad pity. No fanfare to blare out of the hero's arrival. *Alazan* bursts made Boss sit home tight.

Such a trifle as the key to the Renderers' doorlock was missing from Wagrum's pocket. Very likely, left home. (A rising star of journalism has more important things to think of, right?)

He zipped out, and I—fed up with idling in the frigid anteroom—set off for the Town Military Commissar's to report a missing stamp in my military papers, the gap spotted by Ms. Rita's trained eye when looking through.

At the TMC I was met by Oleg Pronchenko in full uniform with major's insignia. The stink of the perfumes he wore reminded me of that yesterday's military broad-wife boldly painted and ready to agree. He chose not to recollect our fleeting acquaintance and just abruptly indicated there was no one there. Okay, I ain't in no hurry, tomorrow's as good a day for me as this one.

On coming home, I asked our neighbor lads, Romah and Arthur, for help and ferried a door from our Site to fix it up in the underground shelter for my family. The raw doorway did bestow the compartment the looks of a primeval cave.

Then Sahtik took me for a little walk to find out the current whereabouts of Arega, the Senior Librarian at School 8. The lady was in charge of the key to the school library where Sahtik, a Librarian, had our electric heater installed under her work-seat.

On the way, Robic, an Arega's lover and her husband's bosom friend, cut short our quest and fetched the aforesaid heater out from his house's basement. In the ensuing shoptalk about their school and schooling in general, Robic and Sahtik looked noticeably sad. I stood by wondering if it was caused by the unconscious libido field between the two. Desire's sad by definition.

Then the three of us—Sahtik, I and the recovered heating device—returned home and (borrowing a trite expression from poets in days of yore) 'veiled the Olympus' summit with a golden cloud'. Scholarly speaking, one may with sufficient accuracy state, that in the case of perfect sexual adjustment even wartime conditions cannot impair the performance.

Another of the missile attacks tried to precipitate us but in vain. We cum in a dignified manner and with the maximum pleasure attainable, adding our concluding grunts to the hilarious yells of the folks pouring into to shelter in the underfloor cellar beneath our bed.

Half an hour later, fixing up the door in the Underground compartment and then the live wires for the heater, I was as sloppy as never before.

Now it's five to eleven with an antiphony of *Alazans* and cannon bangs measuring the time outdoors.

When coming back from the Underground, I met Sahtik's brother in the street. Aram was making for his mother's house he currently lives in. A solitary pedestrian through the darkness and cannonade.

We shook hands as Brethren of the Order of Lonely Hearts. He also sleeps at home alone having left his wife and children someplace amid the town in her father's shelter.

Good night, Aram, my brother-in-law.

December 12

An exemplary calm night was followed by a no worse day. The machine-gun shooting has turned already into one of nagging yet petty trifles of no account.

At 9 am, I visited the TMC where they glibly clapped the missing stamp-smear of theirs into my military identification card.

Maiden day at a new job. The Renderers' is a chilly corner room with three windows in two walls and three office desks. At times a pack of idling men assemble in it, one after another, to wag their jaws and to offset the air chillness with rough smoke from their cigarettes. Still and all it's a good thing to have a work place! And I tried to make a good beginning:

in the room I borrowed from Wagrum the key to duplicate it;

in the corridor I made friends with Ahlya (*really, it's her first day too? well I never! a typist? wow!*);

from the Typing Pool I collected carbon copies of my four renderings to proofread them before submitting to the Head of Russian Section.

About 3 pm, I was told I might leave: there was no more work for today.

A nice and cozy family evening at home. Sahtik was playing with Ahshaut, Roozahna reading in undertone, the mother-in-law sleeping, I shaping and filing the duplicate key clutched with the pliers.

At 8 pm, the mother-in-law commenced to bake breads in the gas oven. I saw Sahtik and the kids to the Underground. There, Sahtik complained of unbearably cold droughts breaking in to the compartment from behind the hanging rags.

After a long and winding way meandering between and over the heaps, stacks and hills of boxes, pipes, bottles and sundry jetsam jumble, I reached the deepest, dustiest and darkest corner in the room. A pitch black hole—two by two feet—gaped there letting in a uninterrupted icy breeze. I stopped the hole with a piece of cardboard.

No sooner had I climbed out of that dust abyss through the sideway and a minor corridor than a tall gaffer rigged out in a stylish overcoat and expensive fur affair on his head confronted me in the main tunnel. He demanded my explanations as to what right I had to cut off the air coming in for all the Underground. I let the sleeping dogs lie and told him I hadn't seal it up completely, so some air was still getting in.

(…all things considered, my statement was true… well, to some extent. You bet he'd never dive in that dust maze to check if I was lying…)

At home, my mother-in-law surprised me by asking pensively if I trusted in God after all. I guess her queer query was prompted by some priest's visit to the Underground where he distributed leaflets of a printed prayer and books for kids, short stories from the bible with gaudy pictures.

I answered there were too many of Them, the immoderate number postponing my choice as of yet.

It's half an hour to the midnight. The mother-in-law has just finished baking bread and ventured to the Underground. I saw her to the crossroads.

The biting cold wind outdoors sweeps snow dust along the street. At times a random cannon shell spices the setting by its burst.

Fiat nox.

December 13

Both the night and the day were quite quiet. Had a dream of

…dwarf Santas in red coats lined-up in close rows to form alive maze in a tremendous hall with mirror walls where a plushy pop-singer with his sugary hit was sticking out from among the narrow lanes in their dwarfish labyrinth until the gaudy number got swept away by a black-leathered angel of hell riding like hell for leather and finally coasting at 2 or 3 meters above the ground as if arisen by the teeth of wind…

At the work place, I rendered one article and gave the final cut to my duplicate key before returning the original back to Wagrum.

After the midday break, they summoned me to a general meeting in the Boss' office. It was a solemn thank-you-and-good-bye affair to fling the gates wide open before a resigning veteran journalist.

Boss, Arcadic and one more member of the editorial upper circles took the floor, respectively, with their tribute speeches varying only in the thickness of orators' glasses. They squeezed themselves out dry to put across one and the same idea of impossibility to list the grand qualities of the departing vet who all his life kept moving in the wrong direction deceived by them those commies—not his fault, see?—yet our paper's door shall all the same be kept open for him forever and a day… In the end Ms. Stella presented him with a bunch of creamy rich carnations.

At home, I wallowed in our happy family life till 10 pm, and then saw everybody to the Underground. When I was back and scribbling these notes, two powerful but mute flashes ripped up the darkness outside our communicational window. I had the usual fit of heat fizzling up my chest. The heart went pit-a-pat. Beastly female shrieks sounded in the street and I went out.

Some forty meters up the street, there was a house on fire. Clinking of splintering glass and squeals of squaws in the crowd of by-standers mixed up with angry demands from non-interfering men to equip them with fire extinguishers, all that being out-noised by the businesslike crunch of the fire devouring the house in high, about 2 or 3 meter tall, tongues of flame. I recollected the red-clad Santa Clauses from my dream.

Then there arrived a team of firefighters (undreamed of) and in a couple minutes put the fire out. My mother-in-law was in the throng partaking in subsiding lamentations. (Her house is only ten meters away from the damaged one). Among the onlookers I also made out Sahtik, took her aside and expressly asked to go back to the children.

In absence of further entertainment, the crowd started to disperse. I spotted Nerses walking away and took him over to arrange a visit to his place tomorrow at 3.30 pm. (The fortnight about St. Yuri's Day when serfs are free to seek another master is not over yet.)

It's quarter past eleven. Desultory shooting of no account in the thick fog outside.

December 14

At night, the cannon bangs woke me up. Then I slept again. No dreams remembered.

It is a day-off today. Roozahna was taken by her biological father's sister to her grandparents. Sahtik, Ahshaut and I had a downhill walk to the Department Store. On the way we met Garric, a worker of Sashic's, who eagerly shared the latest gossip about a missile fragment they found marked 'Made in Turkey'. Presently, they seek means of shipping it to the Soviet Empire's capital as the corroborative evidence of exterior forces involvement in our sovereign scramble.

(…they pin too much hope on the dead horse, I think. Moscow will give no more ear to this case than Ankara…)

In the Department Store they extravagantly put up for sale the goods normally kept for shadow transactions. I bought a kit of household hand tools. A lucky strike.

Stepping outside into the sunlit Kirov Street, we met Carina with her children. She frisked the innards of her bag and presented Ahshaut with a pair of mittens grown too tight for her son Tiggo and then she added also two buns.

We returned to our place. After lunch my mother-in-law left for her home and, with Ahshaut having his day nap, Sahtik and I were given free rein to make love.

Yes, ours was a commonplace marriage of convenience for both the man nearing his fourties who drifted from a strange land in our mutual USSR and the local woman ten years younger, divorced, having a pre-school daughter to raise. However, as usual, I was in luck to meet such a partner in life, as well as in sex. At my point in lifespan, the grounds for romantic feelings are scarce and dwindling, yet, by heaven, I believe it's not a made-up trash to say that I love her. Sure, I do. And even if not madly, I love her properly and deeply and with real vigor – yep! – when needed.

Historically, there are no records of a female making a good wife as well as being a superb sex partner. It's either one or the other. You just can't have this 2 in 1. I am a lucky dog to find in Sahtik both qualities.

At half past 3 pm, I visited Nerses. He gave me the latest address of Larissa and Vanya, his daughter and his son-in-law, respectively. They were our dear weekend friends before their flight to Vanya's Cossack fatherland at the outbreak of armed confrontation down here.

However, my main objective was to borrow *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* to which request Nerses immediately consented. In the follow-up chat, he outlined his current venture at selling grapes from his garden at Bazaar. The basement in the TMC Building, just opposite his house, served him the nighttime hideout.

About 4 pm Roozahna came back followed at once by my mother-in-law. We had a peaceful family evening. Sahtik, Roozahna and I played a pencil game, then all five of us had supper after which I made a fresh start with two pails for the round of water bringing.

It's ten past ten pm. By now, they're in the Underground now. All's calm outdoors.

December 15

This night's dream was a slow zoom-in to

…vast emptiness in a colossal military tent of slowly quaking smeared walls, no action at all just the scrolling close-up of the greenish sagged-in tarpaulin walls until…

shellbursts of a bombardment brought me back to the reality inside our room as dark as the thunder or even blacker.

The second day-off. In the morning I took Ahshaut for a walk to the Main Post to send a birthday postcard to Nerses and Lydia's granddaughter who was Ahshaut's play-mate at weekend bouts of our and Larissa-Vanya's families. Today she becomes two-year-old.

In the evening, a tin tub was placed in the middle of our one-but-spacious room for the kids to bathe in turn. Soaping their sides, Sahtik remarked pensively that the simplest and most routine things seem weirdly odd amid the war raging around.

I concurred, admitting that some TV programs do seem absurd to me when it shells outdoors.

Seems as my back starts to behave, I decided to resume my yoga exercises. Some asanas—even after such a pause—remained as feasible as they used to be.

It's half past nine pm. The family went to the Underground, but my mother-in-law is to come back for bread baking.

Uproar of dogged shooting out surges up in Krkjan.

December 16

A pretty gross bombardment they kicked up yesterday while I was bringing water to spend the time before my mother-in-law finished baking bread. A couple of times while shuttling with the pails along the sidewalk, I heard quite close whistles overhead. Bullets or missile fragments?

I soothed myself by the speculation that no matter of which kind they were there was my name on neither one. What's the use of getting uptight after the threat is over? And I beseech you, Mars, O, God of War, if one of those be more accurately addressed then let me get killed at once and clear.

No silly tricks with curability, regenerating, reanimation and suchlike blithering drivel. One through my head would perfectly suffice, methinks.

The intensity of bombardment grew until it forced my mother-in-law to leave for the Underground and trust me handling the last batch of bread put in the oven before I saw her over.

Today at 9 am, I was at my work place to find nobody in the whole Editorial House. For a couple of hours I fiddled about the locked up drawer in my desk. All my attempts at making a skeleton key fell flat. Full of the shame and sadness, I gave up on the undertaking and just raped the lock open with a screwdriver.

From eleven till twelve am, Wagrum, Lenic and Arcadic peeped in, respectively. Lenic asked if I would like to visit a room down the corridor to watch a game of chess. Most politely, I reclined.

(…why on Earth does Sahtik say I am an outright disaster in terms of sociability? I'm politeness itself…)

At noon I left a note on the desk for all who might be concerned about my pending return at one pm… Sashic and Carina with their children were at our one-but-spacious-room flat, having lunch. I presented Sahtik with the paper issue containing three voluminous renderings of mine. Sashic promptly toasted the event but, not wanting to be back to work with vodka on my breath, I abstained.

I wolfed down my lunch and went to the Underground to fetch our heater. Yesterday, down there they forked out a brand new, mighty looking, heater per a compartment. I planned to take our old one to my work place but changed my mind when Sahtik reminded of the blackout we had been having since midnight.

At a stone throw off the Editorial House, I met Arcadic strolling away with an unknown youth. Arcadic told me to go home as there was no work that day. I nodded most humbly and slowed down as if pondering about alternative things to do, which maneuver was followed by stealthy penetration the Editorial House smuggling *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* under my coat breast.

In the Renderers' I found my note on the desk turned over and used for the unsigned communication dashed off across the backside —'We are not working today'.

What a smart thing this *BHAGAVAT-GITA* is! And so mightily moving! It cut the anchorage and put to motion the very corner stones in my concept of the origins of modern civilization sending them to much more eastern quarters.

Now, I know where the Greeks ferreted out the ideas about innumerability of universes and tininess of atoms from.

And the digits that I was taught to think of as Arabic turned out to be born millennia before any of Arab mathematicians came to existence.

And would not the Fathers of Church be delighted by the definition of Trinity as exposed in the GITA? They could only dream of so refined subtleties!

Yet as usual, after my initial admiration there pops up one or another bitchy bitter word of 'but'… At being told for the first time that the human soul is an immeasurably wee spark residing in the heart of each and every individual, I just shrug my shoulders and say 'Okay, maybe'. (I can trust anything when I am not hungry.) I wince at the brow-beating reiteration of the same suggestion. However, when the idea is blared out for the third time, I feel I'd like to know how it conforms to the organ transplantation, eh?

Suppose, a saint's heart is inserted into a sinner's body (or vice versa), where should the migrant soul be sent after the receiver's death? To hell or higher planets?

Still and yet, the supplementary discourse on impossibility to kill one's soul is an awesomely rewarding stuff in the present situation… At this point, I looked out of the window to the right from my desk to behold this here current situation and saw:

a provincial hotel in ages-long need of repair;

an elderly squat woman idling on the steep porch stairs;

a girl of ten piggybacking her thrice younger brat of a brotherlet;

a fuzzy cur limping across the lane that separates the hotel from the Editorial House.

All in all, a classical backwater town landscape in the frame of a rambling clip-long rounds by AKs.

At half past three pm, the vet, warmly sent home two days ago to enjoy his wrongly deserved rest, came back on a visit. Of all the doors in the Editorial House, only mine happened to be open. Surprised, he asked if I had nothing to lock it up with. I proudly had… At half past four, I went home.

Sahtik had taken kids to the Underground, scared by the increasing frenzy of shooting out in Krkjan. I came to visit them. A feeble candle was oozing gruesome light to our meeting. We could hardly find a thing to say to each other.

Suddenly, the all-out gasp of cheer echoed throughout the Underground. The electricity appeared! Thanks be to Edison and his bulbs!.

I was doing yoga at home when Sahtik and Ahshaut came back. He inquenchably disagrees to keep to the Underground longer than it can't be helped…

Earlier in the day, the Twin Bakeries offered their dough for sale (their electrical ovens are useless during blackouts). My mother-in-law didn't miss out on the opportunity.

In the evening she started bread baking but felt all in and repaired to the Underground to keep Roozahna's company. Sahtik continued the baking.

It's half-past-ten pm, I'm alone. The relative calmness outside couldn't sway Sahtik to staying home.

December 17

Just a model day. At the work place, I knocked off two renderings and had a talk with my roommates.

Lenic was keen on my background and professional preferences. Then even Wagrum had for a while to keep his volatility in check and perch up surprised by a proposed short discussion of a Hellenistic subject.

I wouldn't call Wagrum a dream gossip—rejecting any novel thought, too ready to substitute chords for brains, chanting the corny parrot-cries from the inbred set of ideas they had formatted his mind with (as well as anybody else's among us for that matter). True, the guy is fairly young, yet his hustle and bustle won't let him grow wiser when older.

At home, I basked in as happy family life as any wise man could reasonably expect. The life of down-to-earth problems when finishing the repair of the favorite tumble-toy of your kids you are sent to the Underground where the shelter door needs a finer adjustment.

Today I plan to do my yoga about six pm. And then I'll have a supper and a shot of vodka and go to bed at once because I have to get up at 2 am and bring water for the washing scheduled by Sahtik for tomorrow… Right now, the waterqueue at the Three Taps is way too long, and the needed lots of water can't be fetched at one go.

On the whole, the war wasn't too butting in today. Thank you, December 17!

December 18

The alarm clock awoke me at 2 am. I dressed and went out for water. Dash it! I am not the only wise guy in this here neck of the woods. However, two or three water-carriers cannot be called 'a queue'.

On route in my pendular to-and-fros I watched a night missile attack—the languid flaming streaks of yellow gliding silently overhead to crash someplace in the town. In the heights beyond Armenavan, half of the night sky shimmered with ghostly crimson radiance of the giant gas torch there, the main pipeline set ablaze.

At twenty-to-four in the morning my water-carrying was done.

From 9 to 12 am I rendered one article at work. Lenic came after the midday break. He narrated of his vigil in the Bread Factory, queuing for three-and-half night hours just to buy the regular quota of three loaves.

Arcadic, the Head of Russian Section, asked me—just as a personal favor, you know—to render the manifesto of a newly stewed political party. Sure, I was only happy to oblige my immediate boss but…

Oh, brother! What a mess! The toil of making some sense from burbling gibberish of ultra-patriotic students tripping up at pompous words without rhyme or reason in their mental diarrhea!

And only the concluding paragraph in the manifesto was a plain and clear threat of ruthless punishment to any would-be dissents as well as doing away with all the members lacking in strength.

(…a promise to purge the infiltrated impotents?…)

The local radio announced the gas supplying would be stopped to repair the blown up pipeline. After the work, I collected our heater from under my desk in the Renderers'. I took it over to the Underground because, according to Sahtik, the heater from the recent distribution belied its mighty looks by poor performance.

In the Underground, I picked and brought home a masonry block-stone to make a substitute heater for my work place. Fortunately, I happened to have a second-hand heating element.

Until my supper at seven pm, I was carving ruts in the stone to insert the glow spiral. The job gave me an excuse for not having yoga today but, to tell the truth, I skipped it too readily. My eternal sloth.

It's ten past ten pm, Ahshaut sleeps at home.

The complete quietude outdoors lit by the giant gas torch mutely flaring in the distant hills over Armenavan.

December 19

Inexplicably peaceful night it was and the hush extended till noon.

Before the midday break, I finished rendering the Declaration of the Anti-Impotent Party (AIP). Wagrum remarked, whenever three Armenians settle down somewhere the place sees a political bum and creation of at least seven parties. Well, that was a good one from his kit.

Boss and his Secretary Rita dropped in, in turn, and were obviously impressed by my block-stone heating device. I dared a slight dispute with Boss when he proclaimed laziness as a distinctive feature of oriental man while I argued that the quality in question belongs to all of the human race.

In the morning Sahtik with our children and Carina with hers went to the Orliana's. So, I had a lunch all by my own.

After the break two missile attacks hit the town. Lenic, sheltering in the doorway of the Renderers', tried to talk me into leaving the room: what if a missile bursts in right through the window opposite my desk, eh?

'I'll never be aware of the fact', was my reply.

His advise to at least move over into the corner was also turned down—should a missile dash in I am rather for instant death than any wounds.

About four pm, I finished a rendering and phoned to the Orliana's. Sahtik was just setting off back home. I waited for her and the kids in the desolate emptiness of the Editorial House.

When on our last leg towards the Underground we were passing the Three Taps (Sahtik rather wound-up by the earlier attacks in the day), I detected the pale flame of Alazans

flying on our left.

'Now it'll …' I thought just that much before off went the crash of blasts.

Roozahna—all mad shrieks—bolted towards the flock of water-queuers that froze like a line of wax figures next to the Three Taps. Sahtik followed the suit.

(…it's just so human – to seek safety in a thicker mass of fellow beings: let someone else from the herd be snatched, not me!.)

Ahshaut and I were walking on, hand in hand. Lagging, in fact. He was fairly tired after doing it all the way uphill from the Orliana's.

The crowd shouted at me to grab the child and hare off, lest it got frightened. Defiantly, I kept walking on. In my opinion, Ahshaut would sure get scared if I followed the advise.

Still, I'm not a daredevil—far from it!—that funny feeling of mine never fades away and most of my waking hours I'm busy fighting the willies down. That tiny tearful whimper squeezed in my throat behind the Adam's apple.

At today's yoga my left knee protested painfully when in the Lotus.

Sahtik, on a flying visit from the Underground announced proudly that by Orliana's scales, she's three kilos lighter than before… O, women, not frailty, but vanity is your name. Even the war can't straighten them out.

It's half-past-nine pm, I am alone.

A tranquil night smirks outdoors.

December 20

A nasty night it was, but I stubbornly slept it through. In dreams

…I tilled a kitchen garden on a too boggy mountain slope and then rode a bicycle along a wide path of sand getting finer and deeper and turning the trail into a hopelessly impassable dusthole…

At the workplace I toiled at rendering four articles distracted shortly by a small talk with Rita on her visit to the Renderers' to get warm at the block-stone heater partly jutting from under my desk.

After the final period, I sat back and suggested Wagrum to write an article with practical instructions what to do when a missile attack catches you on the street. Nope. He found the subject too shallow when compared to the life in shelters which he was going to describe in a masterpiece of an article one of these days.

Arcadic also dropped in. Running for an MP in the upcoming parliamentary elections, he could speak only about his chances—too slim in his opinion because his rival's too mighty popular with all the criminals and gamblers in their constituency.

Sahtik had visitors today. Yana, a friend of hers, came to share most sad accounts of her maimed married life with a KGB officer.

(…men are pigs, all of us, as W. S. Maugham vividly exposed in his masterpiece story, and a pig invested with power is the most horrid beast of all…)

In the afternoon, Robic, a PE teacher at School 8, brought Sahtik's salary for last September paid only now. So, even among the pigs you can occasionally stumble on a suave knight.

After the working day was over, I went to the Printing House, three blocks southward. Once a month as any other employee at the editorial staff I have to oversee the paper through the press. Arcadic, whose turn it was today, explained me the supervisor's duties and moves before you give the go-ahead for printing it. After two hours of step-by-step instructing, we parted with a handshake, the first one since we had met.

When I came home, it was too late for yoga. I suppered and then took a bath in the washing-tub.

It's half-past-ten pm. Routine shooting outdoors.

Ahshaut's fast asleep.

December 21

This goodly day-off Ahshaut became two years old. What a tall guy: 92 cm!

In the morning he and I jaunted to the Site to collect the last bagful of apples from the cellar. On our way back I bought three bottles of wine at the shop by the Shooshva Corner.

Carina and Sashic, with their children, came to congratulate.

After lunch, the scheduled sexual intercourse (the only suitable time during the whole week while Roozahna is on a visit to her relatives, Ahshaut napping, the mother-in-law tactfully gone to her place: all fixed and fitted).

(…frankly, I am anything but fond of fucking with your eye on the ticking clock and no matter if it's before, at, or after the action…)

Past 4 pm, Lydia came to our place bringing some grapes and roses. The feast got a fresh start.

It's ten past ten pm.

Five minutes ago I saw Sahtik and Roozahna off. Ahshaut sleeps home.

The full moon outdoors and the first shell-burst of the day, I wish it were also the last.

December 22

The second day-off. Till four pm I was doing my hard labors time on our Site.

The layout improvement is a choice pastime; breaking up frost-tightened clay and shoveling it down into the bottomless gorge that serves the natural border to the Site.

On my way home I stopped for a chat with Goorgan, the only neighbor we have on our side of the gorge. He shared that all the truck-drivers at their state-owned firm work for *phedayees* now. He also has to transport the arms flown in from Armenia to the Kolatac village.

Going under the pine trees that line the sidewalk opposite the Children Hospital, I picked up a big bough chopped off by a shell fragment. There's enough material to make a decent X-mass tree.

At supper Roozahna went off her rocker. To restrain my choler, I left the table and munched the meal sitting at the sideboard.

Nine pm.

After Roozahna and my mother-in-law left for the Underground, Sahtik stayed home knitting yet five-minutes ago a solitary shell-blast made her flee.

Now, only Ahshaut and I am here. He sleeps undisturbed.

Outdoors all is quiet again.

December 23

The pallid moon up in the morning sky resembles a fugitive piece of dull, ungleaming, snow over the distant mountains…

Wagrum came dolled up in a spiffy outfit with a red-and-white scarf loosely thrown around his neck, smart gray suit and a pair of black gloves.

'The reds are on the run' declared he resting his buttocks on his desktop with we'll-beat-everybody puffs at his cigarette.

Soviet Army soldiers were leaving the gray huge Block of the CPSU District Committee— cheek by jowl with the drab Editorial House. On the wide square in front of the CPSU Block loomed a phedayee

CAMAZ-truck with no number plates, as is their custom. A pensive lad in a black sheepskin coat hanged around with a sub-machine gun in his arms. Three more *phedayees*, unarmed but in combat fatigues, stood apart in a businesslike jaw-jaw. Beno, a crony of Sashic's, was among them looking very brave in his khaki cap.

A cagey drove of old women and shifty youngsters neared the District Committee Block from the rear. They penetrated it through a ground floor window and embarked on looting the quarters left by the troops stationed there since spring.

A dozen iron cots floated out of the window and up the lane – one wooden chair and three empty cognac bottles diversified the spoil.

A small group of Soviet Army soldiers did their best to look another way, waiting, between the Block's and Editorial House' corners, for a vehicle to pick them up. At last an army jeep pulled up in

the lane separating the Editorial House from the Hotel. A helmeted officer got out and staggered to the awaiting group strangely resembling by his motions a khakied automaton, inhumane and eyeless.

Becoming aware of the civilian looters, he leveled at them his sub-machine gun, clicked it and, slightly rolling from his toes to heels, barked out, 'Get away with you!'

At this point a squad of native policemen arrived to the scene wearing black sheepskin coats, armed with Kalashnikov guns, and only their commander in the uniform greatcoat carried no visible weapon. The looting dried up, a policeman posted at the broken window. The army jeep whizzed away.

A couple of minutes later the unarmed police officer came to the Renderers', took off his greatcoat and got seated at Lenic's desk (who was out dictating his renderings at the Typing Pool).

The man drank tea with jam laid on by Ms. Stella both for him and Arcadic and Wagrum (I, as a shitty mixer, declined the treat).

And he heartily laughed flashing the rows of gold teeth in his mouth at Arcadic's story about his and his contender's joint meeting with the electorate of their constituency.

They presented both candidates. Arcadic's sitting modestly, like a well-bred bridegroom, while his silver-tongued sidekick pours forth about the exellent unsurpassable qualities of everyone's dearest friend – Arcadic. It's the uniquest opportunity to vote for the best of best!

The fine oration over, the brazen yokel of Arcadic's rival gets on his feet to declares 'Well, bros, you know as well as I do, so just for the record, all you've heard now is the very picture of me.'

At that tea party, I had an acute stretch of the second sight feeling as they call it in the Highlands… Then, I rendered three articles, mended Ms. Stella's heater and attended a general meeting at the Boss'. According to Boss:

the Soviet Army's troops (except for the primordial regiment) got orders to pull out from the region;

our self-proclaimed Republic starts general mobilization (men up to forty);

the day before *phedayees* unexpectedly laid hands on the armory of the withdrawing troops;

our paper changes its name to *The Free Artsakh*.

At home I whetted the hand saw from the tool-kit recently bought at the Department Store for the tomorrow's manufacturing of X-Tree.

Sashic brought a sack of flour to our place. Soon, Valyo followed the suit with four bottles of milk.

It's a quarter-to-eleven pm. The females of the family gone to the Underground. Ahshaut is sleeping home.

The hangfire shooting outdoors ticks over in the ominously raw moonlight.

December 24

The sable dark of the night speckled randomly with the warm glitter of bulbs in the houses climbing the steep hillsides… all that background charged with a clothes-line tout 'a bend' (though sagging a bit under the gross weight of the hung out washing)… The view is available at nights from the queue at the "Suicide's Waterhead", looks like the most fit coat of arms for this here town.

About ten in the morning, the homely glow from the blockstone heater next to my desk in the Renderer's was cut off by another blackout. Poor me, cold is a thing I fear most badly. Rendering of an article full of heated patrioticy made me no warmer.

During the break, to start my spree of X-shopping I bought a book of science fiction for Sahtik.

A small crowd gathered near the Mayor Hall to admire a light tank manned with a native crew loading up an oblong box with, presumably, ammunition. Someone in the crowd called me by my name. It was Gago of the Sarushen village. Surprised to see me. He thought I had left long ago.

'Are you a resident spy, after all?' asked he with a grin.

I updated him on my getting a job and inquired if he had risen to the rank of Major among *phedayees* . We parted with a handshake.

At the Renderers', Ahlya the Typist came to share her bleakest, terror-dripping, apprehensions. She had never sinned, nor breached any law, nor participated in the movement for Karabakh independence. And now, irrespective of so cautious a lifestyle, both she and her children were gravely endangered. Deadly. Constantly. What a horrible nondiscrimination! It's so unfair. Who would defend them now without the Soviet Army down here?

I tried to comfort her with a piece of Persian history.

At four pm the personnel was sent home and the Editorial House locked. My intention to go on with the X-mas shopping fell short in view of huge padlocks on all of the shops. Yet, the tiny shop next door to our place happened to be open. There I bought a black belt for Roozahna, which luxiery item knocked me back for 27 monets.

The evening was spent assembling the X-mass tree. The pine limb I picked up yesterday yielded enough spare parts for the construction. Now it's decorated and placed upon the bookcase partitioning our one-but-spacious room into two.

There are two socks under the the tree left by Roozahna and Ahshaut. The sock from Ahshaut contains three walnuts wrapped in silver paper while he himself sleeps in his cot.

The other sock is crammed with the black belt for Roozahna to find it in the morning when she comes back from the Underground.

It's ten past ten pm. An artillery blast banged in the upper part of the town.

Merry Christmas to all.

December 25

No electricity. One article rendered. While at it, I had a theosophical talk with Wagrum and Lenic.

(…the Master I've lately subscribed to should be pleased with me duly following His instructions – discuss such things whenever and whoever with it's possible…)

It sounded more like a sermon though than a trilateral talk. All they did was just listening to my palaver and making no comment because such subjects had been completely absent from the ideas-inoculation-kit used throughout our mutually vast SOVIET HOMELAND. In the end something started to dawn upon them and Lenic asked cautiously if I was a God believer.

'No fear,' said I, 'my believing faculty is gone for good like the chopped off appendix.'

At home Valyo was awaiting for me to start drinking the X-mass in. Then, he left taking home his family's share of bread baked by our mutual mother-in-law.

Soon after Valyo's departure, Slavic, a Muscovite compo, knocked on the door and the alcoholiday flowed on under the yarn of his front-line stories.

(A jobless ex-sportsman without what you call 'immaculate records' he joined a *phedayee* group as a sharpshooter).

After a while my mother-in-law and Roozahna left for the Underground giving the opportunity for Sahtik and me to have it. However, we were still at the table when a massive missile round hit the town. The moment the last bangs' echo died away, Ahshaut woke up crying.

(…I had a strong suspicion though that Sahtik did the trick to shun an unremitting sex with the drunken pig of me…)

Under the circumstances I only had to take crying Ahshaut and taciturn Sahtik over to the Underground.

Then, I returned and saw Slavic off. He was quite tight.

At a quarter-past-ten pm, the electricity came on in. I'm alone.

Good night.

December 26

In the morning I decided to give up spirits for good, be it even the consumption of beer…

One missile attack in the morning didn't shoo the electricity out. The Renderers' was warm and teeming with guests and visitors, even Boss among the others.

I rendered two articles, then Arcadic sent me upstairs to ask Mrs. Nvard, the paper's queen in disguise, if she had any remarks about my one-week-old rendering of her mawkish essay on the life in basement shelters.

She was in her office room shedding tears and complaints over the phone about her younger son enlisting a *phedayee* group. She rang off and bestowed my rendering with the highest appraisal.

On coming back to the Renderers', I started one more spiritual talk with Wagrum. He retaliated it with a political one.

Veelen, a reporter, presented me with two booklets he had picked up from the floor in the CPSU District Committee Block after it was left by the Soviet troops. The glossy artifact produced in the Azeri capital presented the Karabakh conflict and the snakes in the grass nation of Armenians in terms of hate conforming to the international standards of printability.

At home I was again visited by Slavic. We had a supper for two, however, drinking was exclusively his concern. Meanwhile, a water-tank truck pulled up in the street bringing water to the Twin Bakeries. People from the immediate neighborhood instantly swarmed around. My mother-in-law was not among the last in the queue filling up all the flask-and-cask from our household. Slavic helped me to drag them in. At that point the electricity was cut off anew.

It's half-past-nine pm, I'm writing by a candle because the oil lamp was taken over to the Underground. Ahshaut sleeps home.

Placid darkness outdoors. Good night to all.

December 27

A day in a cold room and no work at all is surely a dismal day. Lenic is definitely a guy you can rub along. Linguistic niceties are quite exceptable for an esoteric shoptalk.

The 20-meter-long queue of empty pails waiting for their turn to get filled up by a small-finger-thick dribble of water from any of the Three Taps is clearly a somber view.

The folks marauding the grounds by the CPSU Block and taking home the coils of barber-wire left behind by the pulled out Soviet troops are far and away constructive-minded people.

At home the gas-heater was giving out its final sighs. The mother-in-law ordered construction of an *ojakh* in the yard.

Firstly, put a pair of stones on the ground.

Secondly, make sure the stones are not too wide apart and the bottom of your casserole rests on each of the two.

Thirdly, build a fire between the stones.

She started cooking on the open fire in the newly erected *ojakh* in the yard. I retired to our one-but-spacious-room flat to lick the wounds in my male pride pricked by the excessiveness of her instructions. At times, her aspirations to have her finger in every pie on earth do exasperate me. I closely control myself but she is too shrewd not to smell a rat.

Actually, I am vexed not so much by my mother-in-law as by this here situation. So my gravest objective is not to let her feel nor even suspect herself an outlet for my irritation which would mean the direst collapse of my self-esteem.

After a missile attack, I helped Sahtik to take the kids over to the Underground. She also transferred the oil lamp there. Half an hour later the electricity appeared! All of them came back together. A very pleasant family evening evolved.

It's ten-to-ten in the evening. Ahshaut is sleeping in his cot. The mother-in-law and Roozahna are in the Underground. Sahtik stayed home knitting.

I am freshly washed in the tub and utterly hurt by the fact that watching TV (the popular quiz 'The Field of Miracles') was preferred to my most natural suggestion.

December 28

From 6.30 till 8.30 am, massive missile attacks and artillery shelling raged all over the town. I was ordered to take Ahshaut to the Underground. So as to keep me down there, they found some pressing maintenance work.

While going to and fro (ferrying tools, hot water, clothes etc.), I saw a missile blast some 100-meters away – like a jet of pale brown smoke leaped from a building's wall. Did not look like *Alazan* explosions. Till now thick black smoke hovers over the houses on fire in Krkjan.

Missile salvos kept hitting the town all day long. In a bubble of calm around the noon, Sahtik and I went out to the Theater to vote in the local parliamentary elections. Normally, I keep away from politics, but after such a massive pressure to bulldoze me out of participation, I could do nothing else but go out and vote.

The weather was mild and warm. However, its meekness could not bribe me into assuming a less rigorous attitude and I crossed out all the candidates in my vote slip because I didn't know a single one of them.

Roozahna's aunt took the girl but very soon had to bring her back—Roozahna got too hysterical after one more missile attack.

Most reluctantly, Sahtik conceded to my plea for Ahshaut to have his day nap at home while she, Roozahna and my mother-in-law kept to the Underground. At something past 4 pm, another missile attack made me take even him over there – by the compromise agreement between Sahtik and me he might stay home only as long as it's calm and the very first explosion be the signal for taking him over to the Underground.

I was doing my yoga when the last gas in the heater gave out. Yet, like a real yogi, I kept my cool and pretended being too much taken up with asanas to let so earthly trifles impair my listless tranquility. And the trick worked! For a few blissful moments, I felt a complete indifference to anything. However, the chill in the room grew too nasty and my make-believe bliss evaporated. Besides, it's not an easy task to see the Parathma inside your heart when they kick up such a hell of noise outdoors.

It's five-to-ten pm. Thick fog outside mixed with oppressive silence.

December 29

No gas, no electricity… Once upon a time in my heady youth, I was ardently revealing to what-was-his-name that no life is possible without playing the guitar three evenings a week at the dance-floor. However, in my later curriculum vitae, I did manage to survive without so an indispensable necessity sometimes for years at a stretch. How long can one last out without gas and electricity?

Missile attacks and artillery shelling raged all the day. Random shell bursts are most unnerving. Scattered glass splinters spread the sidewalks; walls of the buildings cracked open with meter-wide holes. Axes sound all over the town. People fell trees in the streets to get fuel for their tin woodburners.

From the morning and till four pm, I shoveled clay planing the Site's layout. When I came back, the mother-in-law was baking breads on a round sheet of iron put over the open fire in the yard.

Sahtik and the kids spent all the day in the Underground. It's dark and dusty down there. Galloping rats. Smoking lamps.

Perversely, I felt some kind of smug satisfaction out of the thought that our kids had seen not only all that but also the glimmer of a Christmas Tree lights.

The mother-in-law trusted me with the delivery of hot bread to Carina and Orliana. I ran the errand willingly and gladly. Desolate streets. Din of bursts. A cloth placard 'All to vote!' wired over

the street trembling in the sharp wind. The gaudy slippers in the much too wide Department Store windows looked ridiculously defenseless.

Sashic responded to the delivered bread by sending over a baton of sausage and a jar of bland.

On my way back, I caught up with Valeric, a worker from the pipeline construction firm. Stately strutted we uphill together, talking of things through the peals of thundering cannonade. He narrated how the day before yesterday a couple of local cops were beating inside their windowless mini-bus two Azeri prisoners of war bleeding with wounds, freshly captured by *phedayees* in Krkjan.

'Well,' commented I, 'the policemen don't take part in combat actions, but they also hanker to be heroes.'

He also related of six Armenian youths killed yesterday by a shell exploding in a house next to his.

Entering our yard, I saw my mother-in-law helping Mrs. Nvard, the paper's queen in disguise, to bake her breads on the mother-in-law's sheet of iron. The world is a small place indeed—their compartments in the Underground are opposite to each other.

Slavic the Moscovite was inside our one-but-spacious-room flat waiting for me. He started to complain of his unhappy family life and begged vodka.

Instead of spirits he got a piece of reasoning that I had no desire to become an accomplice in killing him. Under the circumstances you have to keep your eye both peeled and off booze. I really didn't want him to walk into a bullet or a suchlike impediment. So I wouldn't put his dear life at risk by helping him get drunk. Then, I saw him out of the yard.

After yoga, supper and bringing water, I visited the Underground. Ahshaut and my mother-in-law were asleep. Roozahna rabbiting on from the bed. Sahtik complained of aching feet.

It's eleven-to-ten pm. Fog reinforced darkness outdoors.

P.S.: About a minute ago cracks of shooting started up in the street. I went out. It was a nearby house on fire. Now I know that the roof-slates breaking up in flames produce shot-like cracks.

Let's call it a day.

December 30

All the night through and till one pm, missiles and artillery shells kept crushing the town. A shell hit the Urology Ward at the Hospital to perform a wondrously radical treatment. Eleven patients were killed and rid of their urinary problems.

At nine in the morning, I was met by a huge padlock on the front door in the Editorial House and no one in sight both up and down the street. A classic lockout.

Sahtik sent me to Lydia with her share of sugar and matches ration coupons distributed at their school. Lydia showed me a bullet she had picked up in their street and announced her intention to collect a necklace of them.

I ferried Ahshaut's cot to the Underground. To retain his chances of sleeping home at least sometimes, I went to the Carina's to bring the discarded and stripped down cot of her son Tiggo.

Cutting of trees in the streets carries on. In Kirov Street an old man—a bashful wrongdoer with an ax in his hand—was closing in on a tree in many a circle mumbling scruple-mollifying arguments to himself, 'So many dry branches in it, who'd call it a tree, eh?'

(…you can't survive without killing others…)

People stop glassless windows with sheets of vinyl nailed from within.

In the afternoon the electricity came in. Thanks to I don't know whom.

When the cannonade subsides, fleeting nomadic groups pass the streets. Their tiny convoys are usually headed by a pair of parents burdened with bulging bags and an enveloped babe close to the chest. Two or three bigger kids keep a-trotting in the rear. Fleeing to villages. You can't but think of ants rescuing their eggs: we all are alike and akin on this planet.

Good night to each and every creature.

December 31

In the morning the electricity was cut off before I reached the Editorial House. I spent one freezing, no-work, hour walking to-and-fro in the dark corridor.

Four more apparition-like figures appeared there and faded into the wood. Then an old Russian woman in red dropped in the corridor with her Armenian escort lad. They had a round of friendly hand shaking with half-a-dozen of the paper's employees that emerged from their respective doors. The escort lad even kissed one of our men before the visitors took off.

She was one of them those self-appointed monitors, I guess, that now and then fly in down here to stay for a day so as to amass the political capital for promoting their careers in the Empire's Capital. You're so brave Ms. Red Watcher!

At eleven am the electricity came on, but I was already home busy at mending the playing-up zipper on my boot.

After lunch, Sahtik and Roozahna and the mother-in-law stayed home to bake the New Year pastry and stuff. I was charged with guarding Ahshaut at his daytime nap in the Underground. Two hours later Sahtik and Roozahna released me.

From five till six pm, I barbecued in the yard. Two hours later, we got seated around the New Year table in the Underground. There were our family and the three women with their children sheltering in the same compartment.

All went along so nicely. I dished out flowery toasts then sniffed at my wineglass and put it down untouched. How long can you hold out as a total abstainer, I wonder?

It's nine in the evening. All this last day and night of the departing year was filled with missile and artillery bombardment except for an incomprehensible pause between 9 am and 4 pm.

Good-bye, Old Year.

My most sober wishes of good luck to all in the upcoming one.

January 1

All this night the missiles and shells of bombardment were stabbing and slashing and crushing the town's organism like that machine-executioner from the Kafka's story. Yet, in the daytime there was not a single explosion. A miracle.

In the morning I was sent with breads to the Orliana's. Their little Anna speaks astoundingly much. Shame on Ahshaut, who, being only a fortnight younger, can't say more than "pa", "ma", "ba" and, when asked what *Alazans* do, he answers, "boom!"

Valyo's father was also on a visit there. He used to have the looks of a retired celebrity but now the image is spoiled by his uncontrollably trembling hands. He didn't have this tremor before.

Valyo, with zealously bulging sinew strings on his throat, harped on—over and over again—about ugly customs and low morale of some inmates in their underground. Frankly, he saw no future in this country and one of these days (with a giggle) would move to West Berlin, Germany.

On my way back, I bought two-kilos of apples at the self-established bazaar by the Downhill Round Road where I also had a handshake and small talk with Goorgan. He was seeking some fuel for his heavy truck to evacuate his family to their native village.

Carina visited our place with her children and lots of presents. Three yellow balloons lasted for a whole half-hour.

When they left and Sahtik took Ahshaut to the Underground for his day nap, the mother-in-law ventured to the Orliana's. Roozahna and her girl-friend Anichka, a seven-year-old heiress to the landlordhood, and me stayed at our place. We whiled the time away as mannerly and urbanely as you can only wish. No talking off no one's head. No trouble at all.

At something past three pm, Sahtik returned and sent me to wake and bring Ahshaut from the Underground.

Walking back hand-in-hand with the kid, I was sissily chewing over whether that bitty hand of his would get chance to grow and become a man's one.

Yoga. Bathing myself in the tub.

It's ten in the evening. I'm home alone.

The machine-gun shooting up there somehow acquired a tinge of a mere domestic thing, kinda ticking clock.

It's wet and chilly outdoors, inhumanely cold indoors.

Good night, the world of warring Maya.

December 2

The first snow has come. The nature's old show is going on. As well as on is going the miraculous lull—no shelling, neither at night nor in the daytime.

In the morning representatives of the stronger sex in the Editorial House got together to have a symposium in one of the rooms downstair. I was not aware of the happening till a messenger dropped in the Renderers' to say that Boss wanted to see me in a neighboring room. On entering the room where a group of men huddled around a chessboard on a desktop next to a cognac bottle with a tray of filled up sniffers, I made a mute U-turn and doubled back avoiding eye contact with Boss.

(…maybe, Sahtik really has some grounds for criticizing my mixing abilities…)

Arcadic visited the Renderers' to bemoan his defeat in the elections—unshaven and mumbling about some dirty fraud.

Lenic designed a new heading for this paper. Henceforth, it is read THE FREE ARTSAKH.

Araic, an apprentice renderer, presently on his leave, dropped in in quest for his salary.

After the midday break, the usual "no-work" was announced.

I took the heating block-stone home and knocked up another one (though not so powerful) to substitute it at the work place.

Yoga. Supper.

The mother-in-law has gone over to the Underground. Sahtik and the kids are watching a film on TV.

I have just finished reading the bible in Western Armenian. Somehow, I couldn't locate the story of Judith, and I also failed to find the place where He, the Carpenter, says: "Not peace, but sword I have brought unto you."

Anyway, I'm too fed up with it and not ready for a repeat perusal. I'll just put it aside altogether.

Yet, finishing is the start for something else. Whither shall we sail? I opted for restarting the translation of Joyce's ULYSSES—my fits and starts affair for three or four years already.

It's nine in the evening. The electricity has just been cut off. I finish these lines not seeing them —just as the hand goes.

We are setting off for the Underground.

Then I'll be back and alone.

So long, the best of worlds.

January 3

You can whip anyone. Just find out your strong point. I, for one, have by far outdone the great Michelangelo. You bet, I have!

The guy was well over fifty when in one of his verses likened his teeth to the piano's keys. I am considerably younger (at the moment) than him at that reverend age, but one of my incisors is dangling even now all over the mouth like a harness bell.

(…naturally, for giving out such a passage the electricity has to be on and so it is since half-past-five pm…)

But in the morning it was so cold in the Renderers' that I never had got the nerve to take my coat off.

The paper's big cheeses sallied out to the Printing House because the last issue had not been released. Yes, blackouts, bombardments but—among other reasons—the workforce feels dissatisfaction with their wages. Who could ever have imagined we would live to witness such issues being settled by negotiations?

Historically, the Editorial leaders' strolling to the Printing House more forcibly signals the end of the Soviet Empire than its subjects cutting the throats of each other while the Soviet Army troops just keep ticking over.

Ahlya the Typist, came to the Renderers' to pick up her staple topic: why us? Today, she prayed to tell her why on Earth one has to suffer horrors at a nationalistic war without even knowing their own nationality. Her progenitor grandpa was a foundling of undiscovered origin.

At that point, Rita, the Secretary, entered the room and responded to the cue by the declaration that nationality is a toy for fools, while all sage men choose to become shoemakers. Even if in somewhat obscured way, her statement, on the whole, did sound profound, I can tell you.

Another Rita, of indistinct position among the staff but of homely-abundant proportions, joined our half-frozen company and, while her nickname stepped out for a second, she dropped her finger-ring on the floor. Was it a test of my gallantry or some esoteric sign for the enlightened?

One hour of the verbal 'amour de quatrein' in that ice-cold fridge of a room followed. I was delivered from my mixing services by Arcadic's return from the Printing House to announce a layoff till Monday.

After lunch, so as to avoid staying in the cold house, we took the kids and their sledge and went out. Sahtik, in a newly knitted white hat, looked a teenager.

The street got turned into a merrymaking hillside. Joyous yells from turbulent strings of kids bob-sleighing in helter-skelter past the Twin Bakeries between the sparse posts of their too bashful parents.

After an hour of that Bruegel-wise winter frolicking, all were shooed off by a succession of missile blasts. They sounded somehow strange and distanced, as if exploding beyond the town though not too far. Sahtik took the kids to the Underground.

Yoga. Supper. Water-bringing.

Now, I am alone.

Icy roads and the domesticated noise of machine-guns outdoors.

Half-past-nine pm is a bit too early, yet… Good night to all.

Month two

December 4

The local radio announced thirteen missiles hit the town tonight.

I can neither back nor refute the dope because I was asleep and heard nothing.

Before the war some of Underground compartments were a night bar basement premises. The owner had even installed a mighty electrical oven there. Today in the morning my mother-in-law in a group of other shelterers baked bread in that oven. Then I was sent to Carina and Orliana with their families' bread shares.

At noon the electricity was cut off. It's cold in the house. It's cold in the Underground. Ahshaut began to cough. Sahtik's troubled.

After the lunch Roozahna's aunt came to take her to her grandparents' place.

From the Underground I brought home our old heater in need of repair. I fixed it but couldn't check up – no live mains around.

Yoga. Supper. Water bringing.

When it got dark in the room I made a Ukrainian folk device – *plaushquah* to do for the lighting. You pour some vegetable oil in a saucer and insert the wicker of tightly twisted cotton wool from the oil pool in the middle up to the saucer brim . The upturned tip of the wicker burns with a sooty flame.

It was my mother-in-law's turn to get her goat. Vegetable oil running to waste! Yet, not a sound from her pouted lips.

It's ten past nine pm. Starry night outdoors.

Good night, by the way.

December 5

Yesterday at eleven pm the electricity came in. I checked the heater. It worked all right and I took it over to the Underground.

And this night's bombardment did wake me up.

In the morning I went to the Site and brought a sack of firewood and some tools to tinker up a tin woodburner. Aram, my brother-in-law, generously allowed me to pick up the remnants of a household electric oven made in Germany about 20 years ago and now kicking about in a junk heap in the corner of his mother's yard.

All I had to do to accomplish the project was adding two more holes to the rusty oven box. One at the bottom of its door to let the air flow in and the other on the box top at the opposite end for fixing the smoke pipe.

The conversion took all of the day with a break for lunch with Sashic and Carina on a visit with their children.

Manufacturing of this quick-and-dirty woodburner left no time for Joyce but the contraption works OK. I installed it side by side with the presently mum gas heater.

At the final stage—adjusting smoke pipes to the burner and out through the window—Armo, the landlord, lent a helping hand.

It's ten pm. I'm alone. The household noise of machine-guns outdoors. Eager squeaks and galloping of mice under the floorboards.

Good night to all.

December 6

Twenty-four hours without the electricity but with a good deal of shelling instead.

Eeooouuaa! Right now the gas has come in! Unbelievable!

But let's keep to order in this here chronicle.

It was a standard working day, yet the daily won't see tomorrow—the release was canceled as the Printing House workers downed their tools and went home. The wages dispute has not been settled yet.

Yoga. Supper. Water. ULYSSES translation.

The importance of being calm

About two hours ago cold it was in our one-but-spacious-room flat. And even more so was it in our hall-aka-kitchen.

The mentioned two-in-one invention—our hall-aka-kitchen—is the project I am fondly proud of. Just before the war I partitioned a rectangular area (2m by 3m) about the entrance door to our one-but-spacious-room flat from the rest of the inner yard with an additional door and black walls patched together from the pipeline isolating tape ("Made in Canada"). The landlord's wood balcony floor serves the ceiling for the hall-aka-kitchen.

The clumsy robust structure heaves and quakes in a strong wind yet effectively keeps out all the atmospheric calamities. Our landlady was not too happy with that architectural innovation in her yard but—as I figure it—she entertains a relieving supposition that anything clapped up in space of one day could be pulled down equally soon.

Anyway, today I was in the hall-aka-kitchen cobbling at something in murky twilight and craving for the moment when I finish the job and enter the room where it, hopefully, had to be warmer a couple of degrees Celsius.

That daydream of mine grew bleaker and my temper tenser because my mother-in-law kept commuting between the room and the hall-aka-kitchen on some or another petty business and obviously did not know if she was going or coming (only much later I guessed that her purpose could be to warm herself up) and each time she left the door ajar behind herself letting the last drops of warmth leak out of the room.

At my appeals to keep the door shut she would refer to her forgetfulness and in a minute repeat the performance again in a ridiculously same manner.

The colder it got in the room the hotter got I under the collar. When she repeated the trick for the hundredth time I had a flashing temptation to madly slam the door behind her but fought the impulse down and closed the damn thing in an ostentatiously delicate way. In the final stage of this restrained closing I felt some hindrance.

Ahshaut, on his way out, had clutched the doorframe with his hand. I was just crushed by the mortifying thought what might have happened to his tiny fingers had I not suppressed that violent impulse. O, dear!

I do admire his way of putting an end to the sobs—an abrupt stop and his face is all smiles again with the last drops of tears draining down his cheeks.

And now: what was the underlying cause of such a wild impulse? The nagging thought that at three in the morning I have to get up and bring lots of water? Maybe, but I had a substantial supper eaten for the purpose.

Or was I driven by jealousy at that local guy interpreting for a British baroness, the supervisor of a humanitarian aid shipment?

(…the poor ignoramus could not interpret even such a term as "medical supplies" for her radio interview…)

Or else, was this dangling tooth of mine—making a problem not only of eating any meal but even of speaking—the main culprit responsible for my seeing red?

Whatever be it, control yourself, buddy.

And, like a good boy, say "Good night" to all.

December 7

No electricity all day long.

To make this entry I had to lie down on the floor and write by the light from the gas heater's furnace orifice.

Ahshaut sleeps home.

The mother-in-law has taken the oil lamp to the kitchen-aka-hall to bake bread in the gas range there. Then I will see her over to the Underground.

Good night, everybody.

December 8

No electricity. Lockout at my work place.

Carina with her children visited our place.

Valyo dropped in to take breads for his family.

One page from ULYSSES. Then I switched over to reading Montaigne's works.

Sahtik preferred to sleep home this night. The cold is stronger than the fear of missiles.

I've finished my yoga.

The mother-in-law has just stepped out for her place. When she's back we'll have an all-in family supper. Then I'll have to go out after water.

So, I wish good night to all in advance.

December 9

Philosophy also can be an in-bed activity.

Waving away my curt declaring her an excellent lover, she demanded a more deliberate definition. I tried and—lo!—*having a perfect body and making skillful use of it for the purposes of the simplest game on Earth makes an excellent lover.*

And then I had a blasphemous dream where

…in the dark of the open-air park cinema where I used to go as a boy I met alive V. I. Lenin and slapped him on his belly with a stick, twice…

In the morning I hit the tail of a water queue. One hour waiting to get two pails.

When I came to the Editorial House the same hugely indifferent padlock hung on the front door. I returned home and took the kids for a walk. However, on our way to the Central Park I saw the Editorial House door was open. We double backed home again.

At the work place I rendered one article. Then Wagrum told me about the three Armenians (one female) of the Karin-Tak village caught in an ambush and butchered with knives.

(…even possession of firearms cannot civilize the brute of Man…)

With the gas being supplied, the air in the town turned breathable again. A week ago all these streets were drawning in the smarting bluish haze of smoke from the innumerable woodburner pipes stuck out from each and every window and hole in basements' walls.

At home half a page from ULYSSES.

Instead of yoga I tried to cut off the bottom of a milk bottle and convert it into an oil lamp chimney. The fragile spare part of our lamp crashed one day ago when in the Underground they were chasing an arrogant rat away.

The project turned out to be a hard nut to crack, I only spoiled two milk bottles at no avail. It's just a 'no go'. I'd better think of something else.

It's ten past nine pm. All are in bed; the candle next to my blocknote is almost burnt up.

Good night to all, be they of wealth or misery.

December 10

And this night too the two of us were making love, not war.

In the morning I went to the work place. It was open but in complete "no-work" conditions—neither electricity, nor warmth, nor *materials* (as they call there the articles to render).

For a nice starter I had a small talk with Ms. Stella. She narrated about five Armenian policemen from Hadroot burned alive. Later, with the mediation of the Russian border guards their corpses were transferred to the relatives.

Then Ahlya, the cautious typist, embarked upon a discourse that there existed some righter practices for keeping your family as well as more promising principles for trusting in God. At half past eleven am I felt I was fed up and went home.

Presently the most endemic figure in the streets is that of a man with pails carrying water or else in search of a not-too-long water queue.

After lunch I equipped our one-but-spacious room with a kind of gas-torch by constructing a thin-gum pipeline running from the gas range in the hall-aka-kitchen all the way up to the top of the bookcase. I hope it won't convert the room into a gas chamber.

Why did Azeri side not cut off gas for the town? Very siple. We are on the trunk-line pipe reaching the town of Shushi with its considerable population (presently only Azeries) depending on this same gas.

One page from ULYSSES. Yoga. Supper. Water.

Most good night to all.

December 11

Tonight in my flashback dreams not of lions was dreaming I but of

…night trains and unloyal friends…

In my wake hours, till noon I, poetically speaking, was converting swords into plowshares, which, practically, looked like one more avid peasant horsing around the baling wire (that served the core string in the barber-wire coils left behind by the pulled out Red Army troops) by the CPSU District Committee Block grounds.

I was not the first in the undertaking, folks had been collecting the wire for at least a couple of weeks. However, if you're not particularly interested in the barbs you can still find a considerable amount of scrap wire there.

(…look out though! The damn thing is pricky!..)

I stripped a length of bale wire free of barbs and coiled it into a few sizable balls to be taken to our Site.

After lunch I went out and bought a big lamp-shade of matte glass (30 monets) from the Department Store. Then till dark I was consorting the shade with the gas torch made yesterday.

Right now the burning gas hisses inside the bellshaped shade fixed up the bookcase. However, the light from this clapped up gassier is too flickery that's why I opted for writing the today's entry under the candle.

When a candle is burnt up we scrape together the remnants of its molten paraffin to mold them into a new—much smaller—candle. Shrinking reproduction.

Yoga. Supper. A pencil game with Sahtik and Roozahna.

Now the mother-in-law is preparing the stuff for baking bread. It's high time for me to get away from the table and go out after water.

Good night to the wide world and all of its diverse inhabitants.

December 12

In the morning I schlepped the baling wire to the Site and there caught a band of neighbors from the opposite side of the gorge with their pants down—stealing water from the Site's huge water container. At first they seemed a bit abashed but then, quite reasonably, asked why I had popped up at so improper time.

Till three pm I was breaking, digging, and shoveling clay at the Site layout.

About five pm, I got over to the Orliana's to discuss with Valyo possibilities of getting reinforced concrete slabs to bridge the still ceilingless walls of the unfinished house at our Site. He pointed out that he felt ashamed to approach people with such trifles at the wartime.

All the hopes for getting electricity expired. The mother-in-law conducted an operation aimed at rescuing the fridge contents. She cooked them at a short notice. The food products were saved from wasting. We had a nice feast. Regrettably, my stomach was not up to the relish. All the evening I was retracing my trot to the outhouse lavatory in the yard.

I dismantled the gas torch. Its flickering is fretting for the eye. We use candles recycled by Sahtik over and over again.

It's half past ten in the evening. All are asleep.

I am going out after water. Hope there won't be too much people at this dark hour.

Good night, sleep tight, everybody.

December 13

Till noon I was still running in the aftermath of my partaking in the rescue operation of the ungrateful delicatessen but then a pill from Sahtik fixed me up.

At the work place I carried on my diligent study of *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA*.

After lunch Carina came with her children and presented us with two intact factory-made candles – a timely and invaluable gift. She took Roozahna over to her place.

I got down to the ULYSSES translation but then Sat took off her earrings in a knocking down hint that today I'd better cut out roaming the city of Dublin. However, Chief shortened our version of the Simplest Game by waking up too soon.

At something to eight pm the boom of a shell-burst put an end to the week-long lull in the bombardments.

We got over to the Underground already full of the flickering candle and burning match lights, of troubled calls, of people rushing in with their mattresses and pillows.

I suppered alone. (Earlier in the day Orliana sent us a pound of cheese and half-dozen eggs by a relative who failed to determine her kinship degree and had no time to muster for me all the aunts and grandfolks responsible for the affinity.)

To dodge the endless hanging on in the common water queue, I ascended to the hillfoot part of Krkjan. The higher hillsides dinned with agitated fire-exchange. Random bullets kept whistling overhead missing too high though.

By the spring, there was only one old man on his haunches behind a low stone hedge. The intrepid moonlight shimmered in his gray hair and spectacles as well as in the water jet gushing from the pipe into his pail. When in Krkjan do as Krkjanese do. I squatted next to him.

On my way back along Uzbegstan Street two bullets were shot at me personally. Those sharp-shooters must have what-you'd-call-them devices for night vision. I went over to the lee side of the street.

It's a quarter past ten pm.

Good night to all my counterparts in this Maya, however close or remote were they.

December 14

They say, the local radio reported the town was hit by well over thirty missiles tonight. I heard nothing watching video dreams in my sleep:

…a thug with bald head and thick whiskers gets cornered by a squad of plainclothes agents and he runs round and round and round their cars gleaming listlessly in the dark of night and desperately shoots at them a hail of notably slow bullets from his handgun lacking power to pierce the motionless disdain of his hunters and eventually they fell and pinion him face down on the ground and one of the hunters straddles over his back and forces the barrel of his pistol into the chase's mouth and shoots

making me to turn away from the ugly scene and to drift on in the flow of the next dreamstream where I meet Samvel who bossed over the gas pipeline constructing firm in which I worked before the war but everything changes with the time and in this dream he is rigged out as a spic and span guerrilla commander and I shamelessly bum of him concrete slabs for our Site but his answer was suspended till the following episode in the serial…

It was a foreshadowing dream because today during my wake hours I met and saluted three of my former colleagues from that very firm: Silva, Ararat and Razmic, respectively.

In the morning Ahshaut on his way home from the Underground called out "papa!" when passing hand in hand with Sahtik under the three windows of our one-but-spacious-room flat. O, Krishna, I'm still too weak to keep indifferent to all the calls from this here Maya.

Till noon I was at my work place. Today Ahlya the Typist kept to strictly practical items – tips and tricks you have to master to survive in this here situation.

Rita, the Secretary, was tuned to higher subjects. She tried to bring it across to me that only nuts believe in God or else some philosophers who are a no better bunch of crackpots.

Then Lenic came and we swapped our impressions, his visual ones—the yellow flashes of the canons shooting at us from the hills, for my auditive ones—zipping wheeze of bullets in Krkjan. In the end he advised me to find a safer place to take water from.

After lunch I picked up ULYSSES. The output was less than a page.

When Ahshaut got up after his day nap I repaired his second-hand cot which I had brought from the Carina's. It missed one of its grated sides. To fix it I made a mesh along the side using the line-rope bought for the purpose from the Department Store. Ahshaut got wildly delighted with the innovation.

At the pencil game Sahtik simply whipped me. Then they went over to the Underground.

Yoga. Supper. Then I washed up in the tub the most stinking parts of mine.

When I visited my family in the Underground, all were in bed—to keep warm—and asleep already.

I'm back to our one-but-spacious-room flat and I am not alone—there are distinct sounds of rats frisking in our kitchen-aka-hall. Deep in each of their hearts there dwells a particle of the Parathma. These individual particles, outstationed in each and every living creature, compose the mutual Parathma Omniscient Monitor. One and the same Parathma for all of us can see everything viewing it from all perspectives, for instance, watching a murder the Parathma does it simultaneously from inside both the killer's and his victim's heart.

(…some truly unprejudiced perspective…)

Good night to all the Parathma fellows.

December 15

A good deal of the night I spent bringing water for another of Sahtik's unfathomable washings.

In the morning, at one more general meeting of the personnel, Maxim, the Chief Editor, legitimized two-hour working day. Though we are deprived of possibility to do our work normally, emphasized he, we'd better keep in touch by getting together on daily basis just to swap news, thoughts, ideas and other treasures of comradely communication. It sounded like a kinda inauguration speech at opening of some boozeless speak-easy or a free-chat bench.

The mother-in-law went to Carina to lend a helping hand in meat rescuing operation there and took Roozahna with her. The linen was boiling; Chief sleeping. To let such a chance fly by would be a sin. We properly proved our sinlessness.

Then Sat went back to the washing, I worked out one page from ULYSSES.

Roozahna returned home too wound up and utterly unruly. Sahtik had to yell at her. No pencil game.

Yoga. Supper. Water.

In the queue to a water-spring I met a pair of neighbors to our Site. They informed me that even the ice had been already scooped out of the big water container there. Whatever is is right.

It's half past nine pm, Chief's sleeping home. The rest of the family went over to the Underground. No shooting in Krkjan. That's good.

And good let this night be for all and everybody.

December 16

In the morning Carina visited us bringing her kids with her. We had a session of paper dove making in our one-but-spacious room.

From 10 am till noon, I attended the Chat Club of Frozen Hearts. No one cared to come and see a gossip like me. I just sat tight in the cold Renderers' reading *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA*.

After lunch, Sahtik, the kids, and me ventured out for a walk in the Upper Park.

One page from ULYSSES.

Roozahna, Sahtik, and I brought home eight pails of non-drinking water from a newly discovered (so not yet exhausted) underground reservoir nearby the Theater. Then the mother-in-law took me out to introduce one more water-spring in the neighborhood. When following her I heard booms of rather distant explosions—some two or more miles out of the town.

Hopefully, I managed to keep my outward looks composed and my pace steady following my mother-in-law. Yet, inwardly those faraway bangs just shattered my heart. It was a fit of flat panic. Some scared and miserable thing shrieked and sobbed within me in blind unbearable dread.

(…I wonder if there is any psychological formula to reflect ratio between the danger's remoteness and the intensity of fright…)

Yoga. Supper.

Sahtik and Roozahna went to the Underground but returned at once. They saw rats in the beds. The mother-in-law is also here, preparing to bake breads. Earlier in the day, Valyo brought a sack of flour.

I am going out after water. So, good night to each and all.

December 17

Till noon I was at Jaw-Jaw Club (the former Editorial House). *THE BHAGAVATA* readings. A chat with Rita, the Secretary.

Then I went downhill to the Orliana's where Sahtik and the kids were on a visit. It took us one hour and a half to come back home. The weather was just lovely. Kirov Street densely peopled.

One page from ULYSSES after lunch.

Near six pm a shell explosion scared Sahtik, she was about to rush to the Underground. I talked her into staying. We began to mold candles together then played the usual pencil game when using the letters from one word you compose as many other words as possible. The player who produced more words in five minutes wins.

No time for my yoga.

We had supper together.

As for the water-bringing, I decided to introduce certain amendments to my mode of life. From tonight on I'll try to establish and follow the habit of going after water at 3 am. The project implementation can be secured by the use of our alarm clock.

It's 9 pm. The mother-in-law has gone home. Ahshaut is sleeping. Roozahna stubbornly insists on taking her over to the Underground. I've tried to persuade them to stay home.

Sahtik is not sure what to do. I don't wait for her final decision and just go to bed.

Wishes of the most good night to all.

December 18

At three in the morning there was a queue (still or, perhaps, already) by the Three Taps. I went to another water spring. There also was a queue but shorter – about ten to fifteen men. I brought home four pails.

After lunch I whetted our kitchen knives with the hand-mill borrowed from Sashic. Sahtik was helping me.

Reading from Montaigne proved that there is nothing new under the moon of this loony world. Here's a literal quotation:

"The war was raging around. Going to bed at night we didn't know if we were to wake up alive next morning."

The passage was written four and a half centuries ago and up till now hasn't lost a single grain of its actual applicability.

Supper.

We had no pencil game to punish Roozahna for her unruliness. I played backgammon with Sahtik.

It's half past eight pm. The kids are sent to their cots.

Good night to babes and adults alike.

December 19

'The moon is so big,' said Sahtik yesterday night standing against the dull-glassed panes in our immensely wide communicational window. Her hint was more than clear: when a woman looks up don't let her down. I was in the bed already–ready and willing.

She went out into the kitchen-aka-hall. And listening to the sounds of the preliminary splashing I was appalled at the extravagance with which she used the water.

(…I do have to get up at the unnatural hour of 3 in the morning to fetch this bloody water, do I?…)

However, the overwhelming readiness quenched the shallow thoughts of the kind… The alarm clock had been alerted but I knew all too well that Sahtik would defuse it. Did she know that I knew it? During the night I awoke repeatedly because of the frustrating thought: what if she had forgotten to stop the shrill sound of the alarm clock?.

Meanwhile, my dreams were peopled with

…brave soldiers in brand new uniform with brightly shining green (sic!) boots and then all images and views coalesced into one miraculous vision of an electric bulb issuing its homely light…

I got up at six in the morning. My new mode of life was over. The alarm clock never sounded that night.

From nine till two pm, I was at our Site doing hard labor on improving the layout.

At home after a late lunch, I started assembling a handcart. Actually, it was just re-adjusting of a discarded pram. I had found it in the realm of dust, behind the rugs and blankets screening off the habitable part in the Underground compartment.

Putting a 40-liter milk-flask on it I'd be able to bring water from far off water-heads. I hope the queues over there are not so endless.

Mila, a dear friend of Sahtik's, came on a visit. Her husband, Samvel, had enlisted a *phedayee* group. The day before he returned home after a night in Krkjan with a bullet slash in his wedding trousers. 'And he never brings home a pennyworth of looting' said Mila with the inseparable mixture of pride and sorrow in her voice.

Earlier, in one of the water-queues I heard a story about some *phedayee* who, after a lucky combat operation, sent home to his father ten sheep, a shotgun and a couple of tooth gold-cases. Loving son is a lump of pride for any father.

(…was that father's pride really unalloyed? If so he's even luckier than his son…)

It's ten past nine p.m. All of my family went to the Underground while I was out after the water. The shakedown test of the handcart proved it's OK.

On finishing this entry, I'll visit them in the Underground and then – to bed.

Therefore, good night to all and everything.

December 20

Tonight well over seventy shells and missiles hit the town, so the local radio. This day saw the final breakdown of the inner telephone service in the town and Krkjan was captured once again by the *phedayees*.

In the morning I took the whetting hand-mill back to the Carina's. From there I walked to the new headquarters of the gas pipeline constructing firm and talked to Samvel, the head of the firm, asking to lend me nine slabs of reinforced concrete.

As a guarantee for the transaction, I offered a paid-up and endorsed bill from the local manufacturing firm, SMU-12, for 18 such slabs that I had bought but didn't manage to ship over to our Site when the war broke out. As long as I have paid the money, then in a brighter future they'll have to supply the goods. Right now no enterprise operates down here. Neither does Samvel's organization. The slabs are idly stockpiled at his firm grounds. Of course, lending me those nine slabs he wins nothing. Yet, nothing is lost, ain't it? Just a deal of good will on his part, backed up with the bill I'll leave with him.

The answer was in the negative. (Though he did wear that combat fatigue from my dream awhile ago.)

I went uphill and from ten am till noon stayed at the Club of Frozen Hearts. Ahlya the Typist disclosed her major wish—to escape from down here by a helicopter. Rita the Secretary talked botany. 'Even trees in the woods have nationality,' shared she melancholically, 'as for those growing on the borderlines betwixt states, they are mere half-castes.'

(…why, privately, I also have certain daydreams of a quiet place in some peaceful country for the entire family but:

Krishna doesn't recommend anyone to care too much of one's family;

three years ago, in a private talk, I promised to stay in Karabakh till my death; and

I'd rather die of a bullet than in the wake of some ecological disaster…)

At lunch the mother-in-law (Voice of the People and Transmitter of the Local Radio New) voiced the public shock caused by the murder of a dentist last night.

(…silly indeed – to perish by hand of a gold-seeking criminal compatriot at the time of struggle for national liberation....)

One page from ULYSSES.

The mother-in-law baked *lavash* breads and I was sent with a share of them to the Carina's. (Orliana had received a supply from her mother-in-law.)

Soon after my return, Anichka rushed in with the invitation from the landlord and landlady to come to their balcony and marvel the view of the great fire in Krkjan. All hurried out and upstairs.

A few minutes later Roozahna ran back dancing and chanting hilariously, 'Turk's house is on fire!'

(…poor imp, she thinks houses have nationality…)

Yoga. Supper.

All have gone over to the Underground. I am reading from Montaigne by the candlelight.

A long and winding road to a far-off water-spring is still ahead.

So long, all and everything, and—in the way of incantation—Good night.

December 21

Yester night in the middle of that long and winding road of water-bringing I viewed a splendid wartime fireworks. Against the background of the full moon floating in the starry skies—three languid fireballs of yellowish-tailed *Alazans* shimmered in their flight among the red-lit sequences of tracing bullets that dashed in hurried stitches across the missiles' trajectory in vain tries to make them burst while in the air.

There also was some shelling in the night. Though I can't tell how much of it.

Yesterday in my talk with Samvel, the head of the pipeline construction firm, he was looking at me from the eyes of Valyo, a bricklayer from that same firm. While marshaling my arguments, I couldn't get rid of the thought that he had not only the same color but—most oddly—the very same expression in his optics.

Today a nineteen-year-old girl was killed by a missile hitting their flat; her mother and a younger sister got heavily wounded.

(…who's in luck?…)

In the morning I spent about two hours in the empty Club.

After lunch one page from ULYSSES. Then, on Roozahna's request, I taught her playing "The Sea Battle".

After today's yoga I had a rare and delightful feeling of well oiled joints and cartilages in my lower extremities.

Supper.

Sahtik and the kids went over to the Underground. The mother-in-law stayed to bake bread.

I have already brought water from the nearby Three Taps. No one there. Every fifteen-twenty minutes, missiles are coming in twos or threes to hit the town with crashing bangs. It is cloudy today, no fanciful views.

The mother-in-law finished baking and I accompanied her to the Underground's entrance.

At home I heated half a bucket of water and washed up all the parts of mine within my reach.

It's high time (11 pm) to say – Good night.

December 22

And even in dreams

…missile attacks went on though with much gaudier rainbow colors until an Azeri paratrooper entered the room and put a razor against my beard…

Deafening silence and feeling that something was fatally wrong awakened me.

At the Club only Veelen, a reporter, dropped in. We had a small talk about the local parliament.

I finished reading of *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA.* The real thing.

At home Ahshaut was sleeping, the mother-in-law and Roozahna gone to some close relatives in the downhill town. Sahtik was on top of the situation and really perfect in performing. I, for my part, rather dutiful than ravished.

Then I took *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA* back to Lydia and exemplary paid for it by playing along with her twenty minutes' monologue on the local politics. After unfurling her opinions as to who was guilty of bringing the current situation down here and whose faults and mistakes still hamper the proper handling of it, she produced and read to me her letter to the three Presidents—Armenian, Azeri, and Russian—asking why they're doing nothing about it.

(…thanks to yoga, I haven't got a crick in the neck after half an hour of nodding along sympathetically…)

One page from ULYSSES. Yoga. The pencil game (I was humiliatingly defeated). Supper.

Now all are safely over in the Underground. The water-walk is ahead.

It might seem a dull routine but these water-walks are virtually filled to the brim by confluent stream of fantasies. For instance, the day before yesterday while taking water, in proud solitude, from a spring almost beyond the town I was shot dead by a sharp-shooter from the nearby hill and collapsed

into the mud on the brooklet bank mingling my blood with its running waters. And quite often in the course of fantasies at my water-walks, I bury one or another member of my family before fleeing with all of them alive to a secure place in some peaceful state.

By *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA's* caste classification, Samvel, the head of that firm, is a *Kshatri* (knight). What right did he have to look at me from a *Sudra's* (Valyo's) eyes?

Anyway, I wish good night to all the members of any caste.

December 23

The din in the second half of the night grew rather fretting. And those two close explosions at breakfast time were not a fair play at all. However, the day was calm.

At the Club (in the Renderers') Arcadic made an invective speech before the audience of two (Rita and me) in detail disparaging the dirty tricks his rival referred to during the elections. Then Ahlya came in and took the floor to share her hopes to escape from here by a chopper. The audience shrunk to one (me). She also departed.

Lenic arrived with a story fit to beat all anti-smoking campaigns: one man got up in the dead of night and walked out onto his balcony to have a smoke—and that very moment an *Alazan* ripped through his bedstead.

Then he (Lenic) asked me about the paper slip kept by me on my desk with hieroglyphs written in it. I explained that this quotation in Sanskrit was copied from *THE BHAGAVAT-GITA*: "Koorah karmah somahchahrah", which means, 'Do whatever you do properly'.

To fill up my empty hours at the Club I settled on rendering of Azimov's FOUNDATION AND EARTH there.

After lunch, one page from ULYSSES. Then I went to the Underground.

The constant out-flow of the townsfolk fleeing from the bombardments to far-off villages has put the number of the Underground inhabitants on a noticeable decrease. The mother-in-law found vacant places in a more rat-proof compartment. I moved their beds over to the new location.

Yoga. Supper.

A talk with Sahtik. She said she was tired. (Which is quite understandable when you are constantly worked up and waiting for those damned bangs to start their bloody din. It can't but wear you out.) And, to her mind, Montaigne was right in saying that death is not the worst thing in the world.

I answered that, to my mind, she's too young to meddle with all those damn philosophizings. And, to reduce the inner tension the righteous thing to do is just not to want too much.

(I, for one, had only one desire: let the shelling begin no sooner as all they are in the relative safety of the Underground.)

Well, right now they are over there, I am here, and the explosions – outdoors.

High time for the water-walk.

Good night.

December 24

Morning at the Club. Araic, Rita, Arcadic, Lenic, respectively, peeped in, at intervals, not meeting each other.

That dentist was killed by his own wife – hacked nine times with a meat ax. An act of jealousy. Life is running high even here and now.

(…or else the investigation was done by the gold-seeking killer's pal…)

Lenic, to my request, made a drawing of an oil lamp do-it-yourself chimney receptacle. For which project you can use tin from any canned food. I was beyond myself with gratitude and shook his hand two times. He left and I went on with the rendering from Azimov.

Lunch. One page. "Sea Battle" with Roozahna and Sahtik.

A nice snowfall of magnificent fluffy flakes soft, and meek, and blurring, made me take the kids for a walk.

On coming back I was sent to the Underground to stop rat holes in the compartment my family recently moved to. Practically, sealing the holes up would make the place more habitable. Politically, it'll consolidate the rights of the immigrant family to their places in the room.

Yoga. Supper.

When I saw them to the Underground, the mother-in-law suggested me to take home from there a baby high chair belonging to no one. It was discovered when in preparation for the exodus from the previous compartment, she took down the rags screening off the realm of dust.

I defied outright. (Ahshaut has a chair of that very make.)

Today's water-walk got snowed in. The drifts are too deep to slog through far enough. Anyway, the flask I brought yesterday remains intact (three pails) so I am enjoying a night off.

There was a separate explosion at three pm and till now (twenty to ten pm) calm reigns outdoors.

Wishes of a good night to all, both out- and insiders.

December 25

The night was quite calm. Only in the morning there started an artillery duel making people keep to the shelters.

Till ten am, when the banging stopped, I was working at the oil lamp sconce following the blue-print by Lenic. Then I went over to the Underground and took Ahshaut for a walk. (Roozahna had been taken by her aunt.)

Lunch.

One page.

The mother-in-law left us on our own, so (with Ahshaut on his sleep) it was a scheduled and matter-of-routine one made somewhat flat by the predestinatedness of delectabilities. The sweat smell of our bodies had a depressing effect on me at the initial stages, nonetheless, we managed to get into our stride, then classical full swing was reached and, in due course, the swoony coda.

Yoga. Supper.

Sahtik and the children have been seen over to the Underground. The mother-in-law is still here baking breads. I am going out for the water-walk.

Good night to all.

December 26

Dreams awash with

soldiers garlanded with batches of pails, canisters, buckets, flasks and suchlike water containers

In the morning I went to the Site. Someone had slewed the scaffold boxes between the walls. There was a huge dog's body half buried in a snowdrift outside the doorway. The baling wire balls (that I had extracted from the tangled up coils of the barbed wire around the CPSU Block) were stolen from behind the Tool Booth.

After restoring the order, I descended to the bottom of the gorge and cut down fifteen saplings to make stakes for the retaining wall of the projected terraced kitchen garden on our Site's slope to the gorge.

(…I'll show to the converted-wire thief that he's not the only guy about here going to survive!.)

Under the thundering cracks of another bombardment, I cut stairs in the frozen clay of the steep slope and hauled the stakes up there to our Site.

At one pm I returned to our one-but-spacious-room flat. All, of course, were in the Underground. Carina and her kids, having come on a visit, got also jailed there by the fierce shelling and rocketing outside.

When there happened a lengthy lull in the bombardment, I saw the guests to their place pulling the sledge with Tiggo and Rita in it. A downhill job.

Lunch. One page.

Then I again visited the Underground and was suggested to manufacture a woodburner for the room down there. They introduced me to the husband of one of the room's inmates to team up in the undertaking. Husbands to the rest of the sheltererixes are of no use for the purpose – they are representatives of soft-ware castes.

Arto and I undid a huge rectangular ventilation tube from those left in the realm of dust. That way we got tin sheets necessary for the project. We also started to bore the outer wall of the basement with a bar-pick to make a hole for letting the projected woodburner's pipe out. However, the final break-through was postponed till the woodburner be ready, so as not to let the cold in ahead of time.

About noon, a missile or a shell hit a house in this street, just opposite the mother-in-law's. The explosion killed an old woman and wounded her daughter-in-law; while a half-year-old baby didn't get a single scratch.

The inner town telephone communication is restored.

At the Three Taps, alive water-queue transformed into that of pawns. People—reluctant to leave their pails as the markers—put sundry things to secure their place in the queue. You come to the line of flower-pots, used tires, chipped cups, mere stones, thrown away boots and other whatnots to add your marker in the end.

For nearly a week I was following the slow progress of the cone of a red bucket from a firefighting emergency stand. Today it was at only a meter and a half from the Right Tap. Tomorrow, on reaching the water squirt, the pawn-owner (if neither killed nor gone to a village) will bring and fill up all his and his relatives' buckets, pails, canisters and other vessels.

It's twenty past ten pm.

No water-walk today. Just – goodnight to each and everyone.

Dece…

Holy shit!! Just this very moment I got it that quite for a while I kept to false dating. Nah! It is –

January 27

Dreams also full of war. This night

...ten-year-old fourth-graders from the Hndzristan Village School were keeping the front-line against the Vermacht troops…

Morning at the Club. Ahlya described how her five year old boy didn't want to understand that one piece of bread is enough for one person.

Araic related about their training squad. They have only two guns for forty would-be *phedayees* and no maps of this country. For map-reading classes they use an odd map of some Belorussian region in it.

Rita asked me for a book to read. She'd rather have a love story.

After lunch, I was Arto's hand in the woodburner manufacture. However, perforation of the basement wall was mainly my concern.

By the combined efforts of the skilled (Arto) and unskilled (me) workforce the woodburner got duly produced and installed. Arto furnished the pipe-passage with a wooden frame and partly glazed it leaving a gap for the pipe only. Now they don't have to use an oillamp in the daytime down there.

Presently, the number of shelterers in this Underground is estimated at about three hundred people. May easily be so. They dwell in segregated compartments. Just like in ancient Sparta – barracks for males and barracks for females and kids.

Supper. One page.

The water-walk was stupendously short today; when passing the neighbor quarter—the starting leg in my long and winding rout to the far-off water-head—I saw there was no queue at their street water-hose.

So, let's call it a day and wish good night to all good, and evil, and those in-between, ones.

January 28

Dreams bring no relief.

...war and pitch black darkness full of stampeding crowds and endless water-carrying…

At times it's hard to say dreaming from reality to discern their border-line and see where I am at a given moment.

In the morning I went to the Club. The red cone of the firefighting-bucket has commenced another slug journey from the end in the pawn line towards the Three Taps.

The diesel fuel—*solarka*—effectually competes with cash now. Sahtik told a story of a woman wanting abortion. "OK," said they, "bring three liters of *solarka* to put the power generator in action." For three days she couldn't manage to find it even for ready money.

At the Club I had a chat with Araic only. The rest of the clubmen played truant, presumably, because of the three missile series at about 10 am.

However, after an hour of calm they gathered and opted for immediate closing the Club and leaving. I had to scrape up my Azimov-job because a minor boss was all too eager to lock the entrance door of the Editorial House.

On coming out into the street, I saw Rita standing among the others on the sidewalk. Taking risks to arouse choler of the minor boss with the key, I double backed to the Renderers' and brought out THE LOVER OF LADY CHATTERLY for her in Russian.

She grabbed the book with both hands and catching the word LOVER in the title spasmodically pressed the volume to her raincoat's breast to conceal it from the colleagues (there were only males around).

One page from ULYSSES after lunch.

Then I went over to the Underground. Arto and I collected about a dozen of maverick block stones in and around Underground. I borrowed a sack from him and went to our Site. There I poured two pailfuls of cement into the sack, put it on the sledge, and shipped the cement to the Underground.

When leaving the Site, I had a talk with Goorgan, the neighbor. *Phedayees* had taken his KRAZ-truck from the state-owned firm.

(…who is in power here and now?.)

Back in the Underground, I laid the collected block stones to stop two huge openings in the room's partitions dividing it from the trunk corridor and the next door compartment. The operation drastically improved thermo- and sonic isolation of the room. Sahtik helped me wash my head afterwards and then I talked to her pleading not to yell so much at Roozahna. After all it was not the girl to start this fire and making her an outlet for one's bitter feelings wasn't a fair play at all.

Yoga.

Then I accompanied Sahtik and the kids to the Underground. The mother-in-law was already there.

They say, *phedayees* have shot down a helicopter with a pack of Azeri and Russian big shots on board. All feel scared at the prospect of possible retaliation by rocketing and shelling at the town. The Underground is filled up.

The door of the shelter room down there stood ajar – to let out the excessive heat from the woodburner.

Supper.

Now I'm leaving for the water-walk. So – Good night.

January 29

In dreams

…on a visit to Africa I saw half-naked brawny natives adorned with feather sprays and watched a close-up of a newly-born elephant in its scrotum-like skin with sparse sticky hairs and had a sex with some black beauty fortunately with no Nature-polluting ejaculation…

Two attacks in the morning, starting at 9 am, then I sat at the Club till noon.

Nowadays, with all the other doors in the Editorial House locked, the most persistent visitors eventually drop into the Renderers'. Today it was a Major in urgent need of seeing Boss and an aged maniacal scribbler with some "material" in a thick folder of an old newspaper.

Araic came and inquired what I was scribbling all the time. After my explanation, he asked if he could read the first dozen pages of my rendering of Azimov.

Lenic dropped in on his way home from the upper town where he stays for nights at his father-in-law's. He put his water canister by the door, made a phone call and then left.

At lunch my mother-in-law just so gently broke the news that the pram used by me for bringing water was taken away. The dump heap where I had exhumed it from was, actually, its storage place and they had never intended to throw the pram away.

(…well, by the Roman Law codes their claim has sufficiently firm grounds. Dura lex, sed lex…)

Till six pm I was assembling another pullcart out of two small plastic wheels and remnants of one more pram exhumed from the same realm of dust in the Underground. The project was completed but not tried in the field.

Yoga. Supper.

I saw all of the family to the Underground. For the third time since morning.

No James Joyce on this day.

The water-walk's ahead. Let's check the new cart.

Wishes of Good night to all, naturally.

January 30

What does a man need for an all-round happiness? Just a couple of wheels for a handcart. That yesterday's project turned out a disgraceful failure.

In the morning I entered the Club a quarter of an hour later because I was helping the porter (alias security guard) to fix up the entrance door. Vibrations from close explosions warped it out of order. Now it functions OK.

The first to visit the Renderers' today was Lenic bringing home in the downhill town two canisters of water and his mom. He introduced us to each other. Her name's Elena. Yet their visit was fairly short – the telephone doesn't work again.

I idled about with the Azimov's padded masterpiece. Araic came. Then Ahlya.

At eleven a pair of minor bosses popped up and promptly decided to close the hangout. I had only to pack off.

Ahlya was going in my direction to look something up in the MAYAC Shop. On the way, I urbanely small-talked to her about water-bringing (when passing by the Three Taps).

The lunch was somehow superfluous.

One page from ULYSSES.

During Ahshaut's day nap there occurred two missile attacks. I said to him "there-there" and "all's OK" and he slept off again. Sahtik and Roozahna at once shot off and out of the room to lean against the yard walls for a shelter.

I puzzled out an oillamp going by Lenic's instructions. It is furnished with a rotating mini-spindle (made of a hair pin) that propels the wick up and down. At the moment the project lacks only a chimney. Glassblowing is beyond my scope.

I'm out of sorts today – having a fever that at times swells up to a delightful feel of the marrows simmering inside my bones. The state brought to mind a line of mine from the times past which runs like:

"even in dying there is some pleasure"

Though the myness of the line is rather dubious. With multitudinous myriads of human beings that were and are and will be on this world, you never can tell for sure whose thoughts you are munching at any given moment.

The only bitter note in this blissful biting the dust is the throaty cough—dry and suffocating. Last time that I felt this way was full three years ago during my pre-wedding good-bye trip to the Ukraine.

At today's yoga I felt as if submerged in a warm soothing bath. However the joints' flexibility kept falling short of their normal capacity.

In the water queue they were bemoaning a girl of nine and her father, a man in his prime, killed by a shell hitting their house. Some other people got wounded by that explosion too, poor things.

In the afternoon, my mother-in-law called me out to fetch two pails of water. She somehow managed to jump the queue at the nearby street water-hose.

On my way I caught myself drooling over a kid tricycle kicking about in another one's yard. Three sturdy wheels!

Late in the evening after kneading the dough, the mother-in-law left for the Underground to join the rest of our family while the dough was getting ripe. An hour later a stout errand boy from the Twin Bakeries brought to our place a sizable portion of dough sent by his master as was arranged with my mother-in-law a week ago. I had to go over to the Underground to inform on this overproduction crisis.

Right now Sahtik has arrived home together with her mom to handle the problem. High time for me to end this entry.

Good night.

January 31

Severe bombardments all day long. They say the Azeri president declared 'ghazavat'—the holy war—on this self-proclaimed Republic. So Sahtik with the kids and my mother-in-law kept to the Underground all day.

In the morning I went to the barber's to have my hair cut. From there I came to the Club but at 11 am was strongly recommended to leave.

At a news-stand in Kirov Street I bought nine ball-pens of the cheapest sort – one monet each.

At home I was called over to the Underground to dismantle Ahshaut's cot and take it out of there to make more room for the room's population. From now on he is to sleep there in one bed with Sahtik.

Then I took breads to the Carina's and the Orliana's, respectively.

When back home again I tinkered at one more contrivance in the way of a handcart.

No Yoga (I'm still unwell). No Joyce.

The home made oillamp needs improving – the wick tractor would pack up at times.

One more visit to the Underground and the water-walk are ahead.

The shelling goes on, unceasingly and unilaterally.

No answering from this side except for my "Good night".

February 1

Yesterday—so the local radio—eighty missiles and forty shells hit the town. And today till half past one pm I was again busy modeling a handcart. I tried to use the wheels from a toy truck but their axis made of wire couldn't bear the weight of 40-liter flask filled with water.

Rather calm a day it was – only one attack.

They say (the Underground mass media) Azeri tanks had captured the Hramort village setting a lot of houses on fire. Yet, the attackers were fought back and fled sustaining heavy casualties.

Sashic dropped in when I was lunching alone to ask how we were getting on.

I paid to Nasic, the landlady, fifty-monet of rent for this month.

One page from ULYSSES. No Yoga.

A rare treat – all the family had a supper together. Then I went for the water-walk. On the way back home there occurred a minor break down.

(…well, the first American space shuttle also lost fifteen thermo-scales in its maiden flight…)

However, I managed to bring water home without so crushing a strain as the day before. On the way I saw a great fire in the downhill town outskirts.

Washing the reachable parts of mine in the tub is the last item on my agenda.

So I have the right to say "Good night".

February 2

COLUMBIA was the first shuttle's name.

Twilights beyond the dull-glassed panes in our immensely wide windows condensed into the darkness echoing at times to a rare pedestrian's footsteps along the hollow street.

Traditionally, silence in the streets is a sign of some holiday in progress with all the folks gathered to watch an autodafe, guillotining, hanging, quartering or some other popular entertainment of human nature. But why does this night sound so holidaylike?

The only explanation I can put my hand on – today is the birthday of that woman whose daughter brought a baby in the Ukraine—making me a grandfather—six months ago. Up till now I have no notion about my grandchild's gender. Communications with the outer world are rather limited down here.

In the morning I practiced auguring: suppose today we'd have as many shell-bursts as she—born this day so-and-so many years ago—had lovers besides me. Astoundingly, the count stopped at a pretty low number – just a couple of dozens. But then, perhaps, the number only reflected her achievements during the three years of our marriage?

However, the blasted bangers were exploding at most unsuitable and sensitive points of time. Some thundered when we were at our dinner.

Sahtik dropped her spoon, huddled Ahshaut up in her arms and rushed out calling to me to leave everything and see them to the Underground.

(…indisputably natural behavior pattern…)

That Underground shelter helps me to keep afloat too. I am much braver knowing they are down there… Then I returned and finished my dinner and took theirs over there in a bag.

All the day I was busy being ill. Sahtik and Ahshaut joined me in the business; but he obviously got over it by the evening.

I repaired the handcart and remade the do-it-yourself oillamp. Right now I am writing by its light (an up-hill job though).

No Site. No Yoga. No water-walk. The water supply we have right now will hold out for a couple of days.

A week ago the nearby village of Karin-Tak was attacked by Azeri forces. Fifteen villagers were killed and many more wounded.

Recently, they found out who'd shown to Azeries the passage over mine fields surrounding the village.

The traitor together with his two adult sons and his son-in-law were staked out in front of the Pedagogical Institute. Anyone swept up with patriotic emotions or just indignation was allowed to beat them up or spit on them at one's heart content, they say.

I, for one, wouldn't take their guilt for granted. "Alles ist Luge, Herr Offizier" were the last words of a Jew hanged for treason of a state at war. That was another war, of course, but all the wars seem to have a good deal in common. Witch-hunting, for instance.

It's twenty past eight pm; all the family are gone. Now and here I have neither needs nor desires —the classical definition of a happy man.

So, I'll just be lying and sweating the fever off and wishing all and everyone – Good Night.

February 3

An extraordinary calm day—not a single blast. The Underground people wondered if they had run out of rockets up there. One more duck cooked by the underground media: this Republic got recognized by Czech-Slovakia.

At the Main Post they've put up a letter-box – one for all the letterwriters in the town. The correspondence to be shipped by helicopters. I definitely suspect it would be a one-way communication. But Sahtik, who was terribly ill all the day, had, nevertheless, written a letter to my sister in Ukraine.

In the morning I attended the Club. Araic tried to explain to me some elementary features of Arab lettering.

Rita (under influence from the novel by Lawrence) pitied there were no foresters here.

After lunch, making an excuse of my illness, I allowed myself to have a nap in bed.

One page from ULYSSES. No Yoga.

A family supper around one candle. It looked like a mellowly lit Dickensian affair. I gave Sahtik free hand in convincing me that the water-walk was not necessary today. Her argumentation was supported by the fifth column – the sloth feeling down my chest.

In the Underground, under the close supervision from my mother-in-law, I replaced Sahtik-and-Ahshaut's folding bed with the wide wooden door leaf that I pillaged off the staircase entrance in the rundown 2-storied apartment block.

The door, put horizontally upon block-stones, became a sturdy support for the mesh-frame from an iron spring bedstead.

The town idiot, Zazé girl, was wounded two days ago; yesterday an old woman was torn apart by an explosion right in front of her house. Her sister (also an oldie) having no *phedayee* relative cannot find boards to order a coffin.

To wind up the current digest of news I, full of hope and optimism, say – 'Good night.'

Month three

February 4

It was a superbly picturesque dream of a

…jam-session in a pride of gay guys moving so pliantly in their queer mantles of feathers and slouch hats but I had nothing to do with the action and was only watching my Ukrainian crony Twoic doing his level best to obtain admittance to their chest-shaven company where everything went so creamy and velvety from violet to purple to crimson to white…

One attack in the morning—not very long though.

Lenic came to the club with the news about the competition announced by the government. They wanna have a nice design for the Republic's coat of arms. Lenic showed his drawing and launched an agitated harangue about that double timer – his sham partner. The lowgrade buster burned the road racing to the Special Jury and presented this inimitable design as his patent idea executed by a painter of no account.

(…"Negroes system" of Dumas-perĕ is still alive and kicking…)

In her comment, Rita said the meanest thing was to keep people down here. All those self-proclaimed ministers and the wide specter of half-criminals putting their hands on fire-arms might like to stay, but why should we?

After the Club I carried the envelope with Sahtik's letter and Ahshaut's photo in it to the Main Post Office.

In the afternoon Etehry, a young girl from the Underground, came to our place to trim Roozahna's and Ahshaut's hair.

I puzzled out one more version of the gas jet. This try seems to be more successful. It burns bright enough and there's no gas smell, only I could not tame its darn flickering.

One page by Joyce translated.

At times Roozahna becomes simply ungovernable, eager to rip-roaringly butt her finger into every pie whatsoever. Today I decided to punish her by completely ignoring for at least ten days.

Sahtik washed the kids. Then she and I played backgammon.

At the water-walk the handcart behaved quite fine.

The mother-in-law is baking breads. Ahshaut will be left to sleep home. Roozahna keeps to the Underground.

Sahtik, perhaps, will also stay home – she has been getting better today and the recovery process should be backed up.

Good night.

February 5

…walking along a completely dark road I encountered a dozen of Afro-Africans discernible only by the scanty streaks of gleaming of their skin against the solid pitch-black background and one of them was advancing like a panther on his fours with another one riding on his back and then their cold coal faces showed up in a sudden flood of light rushing through the glazed lattice in our hall-aka-kitchen door and for the second time in my dreams I beheld the miraculous view of a lighted electrical bulb and the TV-set got alive pouring forth a stream of richly colored pictures and I called Sahtik and she awoke unable to believe in the reality of what was happening and holding back happy tears and this very moment…

… crushing din of explosions filled the town.

Sahtik jolted up, pulled on her clothes and shot off to the Underground. It was three in the morning. Ahshaut—left over—slept on.

I spent the morning at the Club. Araic came and left. We had no chat. It's too cold even for a small talk.

Why did I get ill? Because of the conditions? OK, may be. Still, to fall ill in any sort of conditions there must be a "go-ahead" given to an illness by my subconscious. Why did it give it?

A few days ago while poking about at the Underground's dump (the realm of dust) in search of some wheels for a handcart, I discovered someone's half-empty box of matches and took it. Actually, I didn't need it, but I took it. That's why. Don't take bad nickels, sirrah.

(…Freud is right: at a crisis time, man starts nit-pickingly find faults with himself…)

I slept after lunch. (A sin for a Brahman.)

One page. Supper. Backgammon with Sahtik.

Now, I have only to see them to the Underground and then – out for the water.

So, here is one more – Good night.

February 6

Shelling in the night.

The day entirely calm.

Till noon at the Club.

After lunch, two pages from Joyce.

Yoga. Supper.

A major breakdown occurred at the water-walk. I had to haul the water home in a flask—together with the broke handcart's parts tied up onto the handle. The remaining two wheels, screaking under the abnormal strain, held to the end.

It's twenty-to-ten pm – So long.

February 7

No changes to the parting words work no wonders, be it "Good night" or "So long", the result is the same – the words don't have the power to prevent shelling in the dead of night.

At the Club the veteran porter, Shamir, asked me, as a man of learning, to give an informed answer to his, uneducated folk's, question, 'How will this mess end?'

I, to our mutually felt disappointment, had no answer.

Arcadic visited the Renderers' to ask if Lenic kept popping up.

The attack during the lunchtime left me alone at our family dinner table.

Three hours of mending the handcart.

One page from Joyce. I was finishing Yoga. They started having supper. A random shell burst shooed them away. They fled leaving the tea filled just a moment before to steam away the tailing whiffs from the untouched cups.

Nothing could convince Sahtik to finish the supper first. Maybe, she's right too.

Then I finished my yoga and now—while my supper is being warmed up—I scribble these notes.

After having my supper and paying the 'end-of-day' visit to the Underground, I'll go for water.

Then, finally, will come the time for those worn-out words of the powerless conjuration – "Good night".

February 8

A peaceful day after a peaceful night because of the weather conditions, I guess. Deep snow everywhere made it a day of leisure for all.

One page.

The handcart is of no use among the knee-deep snow drifts. For the water-walk, I took just two pails and coming back thoroughly soaked my pants with the water slopping over the brim.

Now, I'm relatively alone (if not taking into account the racing Parathma fellows behind the kitchen-aka-hall door and those under the floor). However, the mother-in-law is still to come for bread baking.

So long.

February 9

In the yesterday's entry I omitted to mention the cannon shot (the only one) which made Sahtik and me take the U-turn when going downtown to the Carina's. Today, there was not even a single one.

In the morning I went to the Site to find the poles I had cut out for the projected retaining wall were not there.

I visited Armen, the nearest neighbor on the opposite side of the gorge.

He pointed out that the poles were cut down at the gorge bottom. Because their house is located above, everything from down there is theirs.

Maybe, he put it in a softer way, yet the core, when stripped of diplomatic wrappings, was just that.

I most politely declined a drink proposed by him to varnish it all over.

Carina with her children came on a visit to our place.

After lunch, two pages from Joyce. Yoga. Supper.

The water-walk and taking a bath (in the tub) are ahead.

Sahtik intends to leave Ahshaut home tonight. Well, we'll see.

The mother-in-law and Roozahna went over to the Underground already.

So, Good night.

February 10

A bombardment in the morning kept the family in the Underground till 11 am.

Meanwhile, I went to the Club twice to find both times its door locked.

The day was calm.

They say there were two missiles that failed to explode. Stancil marks on the defective ammunition run as "Made in the USSR" with manufacture date from the end of the previous month. End of month production in the USSR always was a downright waste, but what a wondrous swiftness in the missiles shipment!

According to rumors circulating in the Underground, the town is flooded with spies. They say there is a list of at least sixty traitors signaling for the enemy's artillery.

Two pages from Joyce translated.

At three pm, Sahtik came home from the Underground. We also locked the door.

For a few days the Soviet Army helicopters touch down once a day among the barracks of the local garrison to evacuate some mysterious boxes. Their arrival is a clear-cut indication that there would be no shelling for at least half an hour.

Without lingering too long at foreplay, we went over to the essentials. She, as usual, was supremely perfect; I just did my level best but only functionally, lacking the all-effacing eagerness.

(…to get enraptured by the Game in earnest, one should be innocent enough—not spoiled by reading of the BHAGAVBAT-GITA and suchlike stuff… Or else, you simply should be young enough…)

Nevertheless, I duly performed my part in the action.

Yoga as scheduled. Supper.

Now, all have gone over to the Underground. Only the dough—brimming up the basin—and I stay here.

It's half-past-eight pm. I am going out for the water-walk.

Distant noise of the battle at Malu-Balu, an Azeri village in the eastern suburb hills, mingled up with the close bangs of shells exploding in the town every other minute.

"So long" in combination with "Good night".

February 11

During the past good night forty (so the local radio) missiles and shells hit the town. The bombardment went on till ten in the morning. They fired from all the quarters and from Malu-Balu too until it was captured and set on fire.

The Club was locked.

At home after translating half a page, I had to put Joyce aside. The mother-in-law sent me to the downhill town with breads for her daughters' families (three loafs to each household).

They were in their respective undergrounds.

Valyo invited me to go up to his flat, and there put a bottle of *tootovka* on the table and a plate of eatables, over which items unfurled a gaudy oration on everybody's right to live at their liking because we were born to see our kids happy and live long lives but now children from the both sides kept killing each other in this senseless dirty war while cannabis smokers and thieves were burglarizing houses of honest towndwellers.

I skipped the drink but ate.

On my way to the downhill town, the Club happened to be open with only Shamir, the porter, present and he also was about to leave.

I made a print of the padlock key on the bar of modeling clay kept in my pockets for the purpose. At home after lunch, I began to file a duplicate key.

Sahtik came home with the kids, and we went out for a walk. Sunny weather. Calm day. Sometimes it's not so bad to be alive.

When Sahtik stopped to have a chat with a friend of hers, Ahshaut pulled me by the hand to go on. Then she discovered that the phones in the booths by the Hotel were working and rang up her another friend – Gaiana. The latter's husband had recently become a *phedayee* and participated in the first, unsuccessful, storm of Malu-Balu two days ago. Then, he came home in the morning with his legs almost frozen off and slept till three in the afternoon.

Returning from the walk we met our teenage neighbors, Arthur and Romah, in the company of a man in a brave mustache, khaki fatigue, and an AK under his oxter marching them, presumably, over to loot Malu-Balu.

(…paupers expropriating paupers…)

Back at our one-but-spacious-room flat Sahtik and I had a senseless ugly clash, ' Why don't you go to a nearby water queue? The queues are not too long early in the morning. What's the use of bringing water from as-far-as-hell-itself?'

'Because I'm ready to go twice as far if it keeps me clear of water queues.'

'The reason of a stupid stubborn ass, besides the water you bring is not enough anyway.'

'I bring as much as I can. Not satisfied? Then wait till I am done with, and keep a real ass in my stead!'

Eventually, I had brains enough to smooth it out with begging pardon for everything said by both of us.

Yoga. Supper.

And, right now I hear a stir in the yard: agitated voices, laughter, baaing of the lamb brought by the two boys from their raid to Malu-Balu.

Poor lamb. Poor boys.

Well, let's go for the water-walk mutely chanting the Maha-Mantra, and trying to forget where and who we are.

Good night, everybody.

February 12

A general meeting occurred at the Club (the former Editorial House). Hamlet What’s-his-name, an MP, the would-be minister of information, *(…judging by his sturdy, thick-soled boots…)* visited the institution to check the needs and potentials of the paper.

After the meeting was over I asked Alyosha, the paper's Home Manager, for the entrance key in order to make a duplicate (the one I had produced from the modeling clay impression was not doing the trick).

I explained to him that I had some work to do in the Renderers' but the Editorial House was oftener closed than otherwise. And he gave me the key not just for duplicating but for keeping it!

After everybody had left, Wagrum turned up as always late but freshly shaven and highly optimistic about the current war situation.

At home I finished the duplicate key.

One and a half page from Joyce translated.

Sashic came bringing a jar of lard-suet and took away with him the last bottle of vodka we stored. Now, with our supply of alcohol gone through, I'm wholly clean and free of spirits.

A neighbor from the opposite side of the street had hired a tractor with trailer and ventured to looting Malu-Balu but *phedayees* there sent him back, "Where were you while we were shedding our blood?"

Beno, a crony of Sashic's, brought from the captured village two furniture sets and a piano. He's a veteran freedom fighter, a Sergeant already, besides, he has four daughters to be provided with the hope-chests.

At six pm, a few explosions scared the family and sent them off to the Underground.

Yoga. Supper. The water-walk looms ahead.

Last night my "Good Night" was followed by a good deal of shelling and yet I can't think of anything else but wishing – Good Night.

February 13

The duplicate key matches the Club's doorlock OK.

Only Rita, the secretary, came to discuss those rotten rats—MPs—and informed that the block-of-flats she lives in was hit by a missile smashing all her window panes, and that Alyosha, the House Manager, promised to give her sheets of glass to restore the panes.

At 12 a.m. Alyosha came and told me to return the key back to him.

Here you are!

The mother-in-law and Roozahna went to the Carina's to bake breads; the gas oven over there being far more effective.

An unforeseen bounty: Sahtik took a bath (a pail to be more exact), we played the Simplest Game; and rather sweet it was at this, unscheduled, time.

Then, we put on our clothes just in time for a visit of Nuneh, the landlord's elder daughter, who came to be advised in her knitting skills and to share the tale of her mother and brother's adventures on their looting expedition.

A day ago our landlady Nasic, briefly complained to my mother-in-law that everything portable had already been taken away from Malu-Balu; however, she also managed to bring some plates and cutlery from down there.

Her son, Arthur, returned with a tightly packed sports-bag and the story how in one of the houses he saw an alive Azeri old woman.

How many looters before him had been entering that house and taking away her miserable belongings in front of her eyes?

Yes, yes, I know, in the Azeri town of Gyanja eleven Armenian oldies were pulled out of the geriatric house lined up in the field and mown down 'en masse' with machine guns. I know that and yet …

(…seven-or-so-years ago, having neither friends nor family, I performed a self-invented rite to exhume the WW III. For a lonely wolf, the Armageddon seems nothing but a drizzle. And 'Ewige Weibliche' hasn't missed out on playing one of its practical jokes: I've got some war now on my hands when there are beings the fear for whom makes me vulnerable.

"War" is a conventional term to cover and render pardonable the most inhuman atrocities of raging bestiality. Taking sides in a war not only besmears the joining partaker with its gory dirt—current and previous—but makes him one with all the parties involved.

Tell me of no "holy causes" or "historical justices", all I see is – you're possessed.

That's why I am not over-sympathizing with any side in this here war where, of course, no one will understand anything in this schizoid blah-blah-blah of mine but still and all…)

…still and yet, I'm glad that that poor old robbed Azeri woman was left alive by marauding paupers.

Now, to stop the looting in Malu-Balu, they've posted check points on the roads to the village. A useless post-facto move.

One page from Joyce translated. Yoga. Supper.

From-four-till-six pm, there was a rather intense bombardment. One of the salvos caught the mother-in-law and Roozahna on their way to the Underground. No damage except the psychological shock.

Now, they all are in the Underground, I am leaving for the water-walk.

I wonder where this distinct taste of tobacco in my mouth is from? Strange indeed.

As a nice good guy say I – "Good ni…"

February 14

The ten-day punitive communicational estrangement that I imposed on Roozahna expired today – I commenced speaking to her again.

At first, she was quite surprised, then promptly scratched a few drawings and showed them to me, as a reward for my improved behavior, I guess.

Aesthetic treats were served to me also at the Club where Lenic brought and exhibited two of his paintings, fifteen by twenty-inches each.

Enlarged copies of mawkish postcard pictures. The first depicted a sparrow in a straw hat holding a bunch of three strawberries. A fully-clad dog was on the second one with a newspaper in his pocket. Both paintings finished off in an astoundingly straw-splitting manner.

(…microscopic masterpieces…)

Communion with art in any of its forms sends man's thoughts and looks aloft. Taking a leak in the Club's WC, I raised my eyes and noticed half a dozen of whitely icicled spiders hanging from their cobweb stuck to the ceiling.

On my way home back from the Club I spotted a foreigner shooting with his camera the pot-pail-tin-cone-etc. pawn line at the Three Taps.

(…a pot shot…)

I visited Lydia to collect the iron wheel proposed to me by her husband Nerses in our talk end last year when I mentioned my intention to construct a wheel-barrow for the Site. Lydia informed me that some international commission was going to visit this region.

The briefing was cut short when she took off her slipper and hurriedly whack-whacked to death a tiny mouse on the asphalted ground of her yard in front of me.

(…the International Society for Animal Protection wouldn't approve of the barbarity…)

After lunch, one page from Joyce translated.

There was some shelling, but Ahshaut slept on, and I asked Sahtik to leave him home. With the shelling stepped up to be reiterated hourly all of the family went over to the Underground at six pm.

Three hundred yards down this street a shell-fragment pierced the heart of a woman.

(…an enviable piece of luck: she never knew what happened…)

Yoga. Supper.

The water-walk's ahead, the day's behind.

Why not to say – "Good night"?

February 15

During yesterday's water-walk, I met one more me—a cart-pulling figure with a flask of the same make, plodding away through the night from the same some-hell-of-a-faraway quarters.

At night I heard explosions of the GRAD—an advanced weapon of mass destruction, according to the Russian TV news program VESTI. What will come next? An H-bomb?

In the morning I went to the Site. The water hose was stolen there.

I clapped up a rough-and-ready one-wheeled barrow. A robust thing—clumsy but functional.

From ten am till now, the bombardment is going on. They fire five-to-ten missiles at a time every half-hour.

When at the Site, I watched a pillar of thick black smoke from a cottage set on fire by a missile. No crowd around it, no firefighters; only the usual shooting-like cracks of the roof slate devoured by flames.

On the way back, I surveyed recent destruction. In the building of Sahtik's school, there also appeared a fresh hole as wide as a church gate. Lots of glassless windows a-gape above the side-walks littered with debris. Rare cars burn the road. Solitary pedestrians abruptly duck and look around after every thundering crack, some of them keep jogging.

I've trained myself not to pull my head into the shoulders at the bangs of bursting shells. Whenever they start to explode I switch on chanting of the Maha-Mantra in my mind—to secure a one-way ride from this here world.

However, during one of the water-walks, in spite of all my cultivated braveness, I quaked and stooped very low at what I took for the wheezing of a shell fragment, but it was just a loud catcall from the fence over my head.

After lunch I, together with Arto, stopped a couple of rat holes in the Underground room; some other maintenance work was done there too.

One page translated. Yoga.

The mother-in-law baked breads upstairs, in the Nasic's kitchen: the landlady's gas oven is much more efficient.

I had supper all by myself.

The water walk's ahead. Good night…

February 16

A lot of shelling occurred last night, they used the GRAD missiles lavishly.

In the morning I went to the Site, took the barrow constructed the day before and made off for the nearest wood.

It turned out to be rather a crowded place as for a wood. While felling trees to cut out twelve poles for the Site's projected fencing, I spotted no less than half a dozen men (some with guns), a woman and a horse trafficking along the trail.

I brought the poles to the Site—an up-hill work most of the way. Straining at the barrow-handles was taking too much out of me. At times I simply had to stop for a rest and—swimming in the sweat inside my clothes—stretch out on the roadside beside the loaded barrow.

Back at the Site, no sooner had I untied the poles from the barrow but there broke out the Sodom-and-Gomorrah which goes on till now.

Today I saw:

explosion bursts ahead and behind me;

a huge piece of a tree trunk thrown aloft like a pencil stub among the spray of roofing parts madly spinning in all the planes;

a large pack-house going up in flames;

a mangy dog with his head completely lost desperately tearing off for life not knowing where to among those crazy thunder-bolts from everywhere.

And from the evening impressions:

fatty red sparks and thundering flashes when a GRAD volley hit a block-of-flats in the street where I was pulling the handcart;

a coal black stream of smoke bending under the blue sea of the moonlit sky;

one more fire but from afar.

In the intervals I:

took a bath (one pail);

translated one page.

And I had:

a quickie with Sahtik,

yoga,

supper,

water-walk.

Now I've got all the right to call it a day and to wind up with a – "So long".

February 17

It can be scored as a day of impossible incredible calmness. They say the international commission has arrived.

In the morning four or five members of the editorial staff popped up, in turn, at the Club for no longer than a couple of minutes each.

Only Rita sat for a half-hour describing the destruction she saw, and how during the bombardments she was covering her face with a blanket to stave off uglifying scars in case a missile hit her place and she were wounded. She wound up in her usual vein, lashing out at the bunch of social misfits calling themselves the Government. The wackos were not fit to hold a candle to Boss.

(…it seems she unconsciously believes that if he were down here and not in Yerevan (where he, actually, is for a month or so), everything would get all right somehow. He's so big and solid looking…)

Yesterday I—perhaps, with unnecessary audacity—ate a somewhat stale bit of bread and today it was keeping me if not running then, at least, striding hurriedly.

(…no-one to blame though—you've got your five wits, pal. Look before you pick a thing up…)

After the lunch an irresistible spell of sleep felled me.

No Joyce. No yoga.

Sashic brought a pail of barleycorn.

In the evening we had a regular (once in a blue moon) treat of the all-in family supper.

I played the pencil game with Sahtik and Roozahna.

At eight pm I escorted them to the Underground. Steady bluish effulgence of the full-moon flooded all the world, delineating finely our shadows gliding along the sidewalk.

Now, I'm setting off for water.

Be the night as good as this day was.

February 18

It turned out a still and peaceful day as warm as a day in late spring.

And in the preceding night dream

…it was summer with Sahtik and me having a quarrel in the Ukrainian town of Konotop and I left for the neighboring Bakhmuch town but because of a blockade and the disrupted railroad communication I had to travel in a truck whose dump was packed up with a flock of civilians and only I was wearing sea-bee's uniform and when we arrived to Bakhmuch the trucker demanded fifty monets and I searched through my pockets only to find a handful of motley nickels some of them blackened and some brand new but obviously not enough to pay the fare and I agonizing from the humiliation started to bum money from the passers-by until an unknown girl entered the room where Sahtik and I still kept quarreling and said it's merely a dream and nothing else…

Till noon I was at the Club.

Shamir, the porter, and I discussed whether or not the Russians were going to sent troops down here.

'Not a chance!' was our unanimous conclusion.

After the lunch one page from Joyce translated.

On the landlord's advice, I took out a certain spare part from the gas oven after which modification my mother-in-law baked breads in thrice shorter time than ever before.

In the twilight getting more and more dense, I went to the downhill town carrying breads. It looked like a meek springtime evening when nice souls feel inexplicable languor, and young women and girls have a sad and dismayed look about them.

After supper the mother-in-law reached her turn to take water from the water-spring she had been queuing to from seven in the morning. I brought the water in.

Then, she and Roozahna took off to the Underground.

It must be a good night…

February 19

By Sahtik's calculations, three years ago this night we married. So, it was our wedding night celebration lit by the full moon light flooding in through the three immensely wide windows to mingle with the glimmer of a flickering candle.

Having a loose tooth dangling all over your mouth curbs an over-ardent voluptuousness all right, and yet it was a good night.

And with her gorgeous bottom and mature bosom contrasting to her maidenish arms and incredulously tiny hands Sahtik does look lovely when naked.

In the morning nobody attended the Club, obviously kept away by the detonation of consecutive GRAD volleys.

(…some mighty thing this GRAD is, faith, a real masterpiece of human genius…)

This time I didn't switch on chanting of the Maha-Mantra. My mind got stuck in the chewing gum of Azimov's novel while the walls leaped from the nearby explosions and the pane glasses were breaking up and coming down to the floor with dismal high-pitched tinkle. Rendering midst explosions doesn't mean braveness; I do it just because I have nothing else to do.

The Club's lavatory window was also smashed, however, the whitely icicled (or rather mildew crusted) spiders were still hanging from the ceiling.

Leaving at noon, I observed the hillock of masonry stones where it was the TV Studio Block swept away while I was idling in the Club. Grad bursts leave after themselves a sticky stink of burned rubber in the air.

Up-till-now unchecked fires are on in the town under the missile attacks being repeated over and over again.

After the lonesome lunch, one page from Joyce. Then, I took up reading of *The Arabian Nights* in Armenian to tone up my command of the language.

Yoga. Supper.

A water-walk's ahead. (Just for the fitness' sake, right now there is no actual need of water in the household.)

Good night.

February 20

In dreams I witnessed

…a peace-making meeting held in Hojalu Village by horny-palmed workmen from both sides gathering—one by one—in a shabby shack lit with a miraculously bright electric bulb above the three Azeries and three Armenians and me and two village women exchanging horny jokes and speaking some common rough language while waiting for some more participants to come…

They say that TV news VESTI said that the town's yesterday's portion of the GRAD missiles was 240 (forty and two hundred).

At the club I saw only Shamir, the porter.

After lunch I replaced the rubber pipe from the gas stove in the kitchen to the gassier in the room with a newer one because yesterday there was an unmistakable smell of gas in the room.

The mother-in-law baked breads and sent me to the downhill town. A willing errand boy I am!

Pictures of destruction met only but too often. The most impressive are those of the smashed down TV Center and the ruins of the huge Trade Unions Block near the Upper Round Road. Just sooty walls remained there with all the inside toppled into the still smoldering heaps.

Sounds of hammering all along Kirov Street—folks mend the staved-in windows and ruined flats. Life on the edge of a live volcano goes on.

Carina's place survived intact in the yesterday's bombardment. Orliana's block-of-flats was hit by half a dozen of missiles. One of them exploded in the basement, fortunately, causing no casualties.

Sashic proposed to take all the children and their mothers to his native village. The idea sounds quite reasonable.

Upon returning, half-page from Joyce.

There were problems with my yoga: yesterday when in the Lotus, some spare part in my left knee slipped out of its place. I clicked it in, but the pain from the dislocation had been felt ever since. That's why my today's yoga was far from perfect.

Supper.

The mother-in-law and Roozahna went to the Underground. Ahshaut and Sahtik are still home.

The day was quite quiet; she wants to stay home tonight, but feels afraid.

The water-walk awaits me. So – Good night.

P.S.: Two minutes after the "Good night" a few separate bursts scared Sahtik away. I saw them to the Underground. Shelling never subsided during all the water-walk. When I was back home, two massive GRAD volleys hit the night town.

February 21

The winter is back again. It snows for two days at a stretch.

The Club was locked, but—with a glowing pride—I took the duplicate key out of my coat pocket… I locked myself away in the building and for an hour or so worked alone until I heard someone pulling at the front door.

(Alyosha, the Hoouse Manager, urged me to keep it latched when alone in the building: there are typewriters in the rooms, you know.)

I thought it was Lenic with his competitional coat of arms but it turned out to be Rita. I, conversationally, told her about my mistake and she instantly burst out, 'Idiots! The coat of arms! What for? The communal tomb?'

She leaned against the wooden partition put along the first flight of stairs, half of her face hidden behind the partion edge, and gazed at me with her left eye full of sorrow or pain or something of the sort.

'Are you alive?' she asked wearily. Then, she broke the news, "There is no town. It doesn't exist any more. Why do they keep me here?'

And, after a pause, she added almost in whisper, 'I've seen them. The wounded.'

She asked if anyone else was in, and if Boss had returned.

My answers were in the negative. She went away.

Five minutes later Aida, a typist, came. They told her the Editorial House had been set ablaze. It, actually, was not, but she, all the same, decided to take home her slippers and the box of tea she was keeping at her work place.

Arcadic appeared and then Guegham, a journalist. For an entire half-hour, the Renderers' turned into a chatter room with four of us talking about nothing in particular. Then Rafic, one more journalist, joined in and finally—once again—Rita.

Arcadic asked her if the windows in her flat were still broken and letting the wind in. Her answer was in the affirmative.

Then, he gave an account of his talk on her behalf with some big-shot from the new Government.

'I could give her an official pass-bill, but all the same they wouldn't take her on the helicopter.' confessed the big-(but powerless)-shot.

'Why?' looking at Arcadic asked she—a small irreversibly aging girl without any close relative in this extinct town awfully far away from her Ma and with the cold winter wind sweeping over her one-room flat.

She was not crying but the tears rang all too distinctly in her voice. 'Why—they—I—why—…'

It was almost 12 am and I remembered those two sizable sheets of vinyl I had hammered from inside to the two non-communicational windows in our one-but-spacious-room flat and proposed them to her.

All of us left, and I locked the Club. Together with Rita, I went uphill towards our place.

Suddenly, she baulked and announced it unseemly to go there without being acquainted with my wife. So, I promised her to bring the vinyl tomorrow to the Club, forgetful that tomorrow was Saturday—a day-off.

At lunch there came a canon bang from the Soviet Army garrison, and Sahtik, taking it for a signal of a nearing missile attack, rushed off with the children to the Underground.

Sashic appeared hurriedly and drove away having left a halfsackful of flour.

A page-and-a-half from Joyce translated.

At three pm I went to the downhill town to see Sashic and Valyo and discuss Sashic's proposal to evacuate our women and kids.

Sashic said he had a loft-house in the Siznic village with a supply of fire-wood there. Together we went to Valyo and on our way met Edo—Valyo's cousin—who also hankered to find a quiet place for his family and was also going to Valyo to discuss the matter.

However, Valyo was not fit for talking business. Shortly before our arrival, he battered his twelve-year-old son, Sego. The boy had been out with his friends for too long. His father got too worked up with anxiety about his dear son and beat him on his return. He beat him in the underground, severely as if fighting an adult, using the boy as an outlet to dump this constant nervous tension; and during our visit he was in profound prostration, hardly speaking a word, shocked by his own deed.

Our unstarted discussion was interrupted by a prolonged GRAD hail. All ran downstairs. I lingered behind to make a piss (I noticed more than once that sudden volleys loosen my bladder) and to switch off the gas in the kitchen (Orliana was making tea for us).

Valyo came back, somewhat ashamed, to switch off the gas already switched off.

I was heading home up Kirov Street. At some places the sidewalks were totally covered with the rubble and debris. A desultory shelling was going on.

Along the entire street, I encountered no more than a dozen people—three of them astray soldiers from the local garrison roaming midst the dead town with no comprehensible aim: one more species of poor boys. What for?

I came back too late for my yoga.

Supper.

Then, I washed the plates they left behind scared by the GRAD bursts.

Another hail of missiles hit the destroyed town.

Now, it's calm. Twenty-past-nine pm.

The water-walk is ahead after which I'll have the privilege to call it a day.

Good night.

February 22

At 9 am I was at the Club. An hour later somebody pulled at the entrance door latched from within. I went to open it. Today, on a Saturday, no one from the staff was supposed to come; so it could be only Rita after the vinyl I had promised to give her.

However, my guess was not correct. There stood Arcadic. We had a beard-to-beard talk on the broad one-step porch: he—spectacled, making leather-gloved gestures in front of me; and I—bareheaded, holding the solid pad-lock in my hand.

He said that his pal, an MP, agreed to sign a passbill for Rita's departure, only she had to have a certificate signed by a physician (say, by the Boss' wife) about her being subject to some urgent medical treatment unavailable in this here Republic.

The right eye of this Arcadic boy looked quite good, perhaps, a bit shifty yet good.

(…I don't care to look into people's sinister one, except when I'm left with no other choice…)

He went away. There was another pull at the door. This time it was Rafic, the consort of the paper's queen in disguise. He left in less than five minutes without mentioning a reason for his turning up. Did he come to check if I keep promises?

Then, finally, Rita came in (I, at long last, was smart enough to leave the entrance door open).

On seeing me in the Renderers' alone, she was obviously disappointed. 'Nobody's here?' asked she. (A good question on a Saturday!)

She tried to ask it in a smarter way, 'Has anyone been here?'

I knew she meant Arcadic and answered, 'Yeah, there was,' I made a sadistic pause and ended, 'Rafic was here and he's just left.'

Then, I gave her those sheets of vinyl and a handful of wrapped up nails, apologizing that they were second-hand ones. I made it a special point to inquire if she had a reliable neighbor to drive them in.

And, after all this procrastination when she collected and absently put the things into her bag, I dropped playing suspension games and broke the news she was so eager to know about the pass-bill promised for her.

She happily rushed out of the Renderers' and down the corridor, and down the half-dozen worn-out wooden stairs, but was stopped by the metal entrance door, and—forgetful to turn its handle down—she was only squeaking and ramming at the door with all her light body, vainly and desperately, like a caged bird…

After lunch I went to the downhill town with two additional loaves of breads the mother-in-law had baked in the morning.

Carina pensively sat next to her children doing their nap time in the underground.

She said that Sashic went to Valyo at ten am, but the latter was not home and now Sashic also was somewhere in the town.

I went to Valyo. Near their block-of-flats I met his father—vet Simon— making for his son's.

Orliana repeated Carina's account that Valyo left early in the morning. She gave us the key of their flat to wait for Valyo up there… We were sitting and waiting. At times just sitting.

Simon complained of the hard times we were having and related about his mode of survival. Then, he retold me the joke he made in the late thirties. Valyo never came. When Simon stretched out on the sofa, I left.

Down in the underground, Orliana said Valyo had not told her a word about moving to Sashic's village.

I went uphill and near the Bus Station visited Ruben, a driver from that pipeline constructing firm. He said his truck-bus was out of order after an accident.

Sashic was knocking around their apartment block. We had a talk sitting in his car. He outlined his plan to use an ambulance. At the moment the roads outside the town are impassable for an ordinary car – only an ambulance can get through. He could fuel an ambulance vehicle—all of them stopped operating long ago because of petrol absence.

When I came back, Roozahna was not at home. Her aunt Susanna suggested taking her to their village, not far from the Sashic's one, and they had already taken off.

Then, Sashic and Carina came without their children (a good neighbor was asked to look after them in their underground), and we planned details of the would-be evacuation and discussed what things were to be taken to the village.

When the assembly was over, they went home. My mother-in-law stepped out and I dived into the ULYSSES translation until Sahtik asked how much was left of the today's portion.

' Half a page. Why?'

' Mother went to her place for an hour or so.'

' Really?'

' Exactly!'

Well, it was a grand one—a piece of pride for any male. If not only for the carping thought at the back of my mind: so what? gonna apply for the Noble’s Prize? But it came afterwards.

Ahshaut got up at five pm. An hour later a shell burst sent them to the Underground.

No yoga. (The Omni-monitoring Parathma knows better if that was because of my sloth or the aching knee.)

At supper Sahtik related about sixty traitors arrested for espionage and signaling for the enemy artillery. Reiterating of the stale news clearly indicated tendencies of stagnation in the underground mass media.

The water-walk is ahead and then a try at having a – good night.

February 23

(I was on the brink of writing 'December' once again.)

Two missile-volleys at night: of forty-rockets each. They, reportedly, hit Sashic-Carina's quarter.

After breakfast, I went down there. At times I was walking along stretches of sidewalks not covered with crashed rubble and boughs hacked by explosions off the trees in the streets. In one of the trees—some thirty-feet above the ground—there hung out a yellow half-burned armchair.

When I entered the underground in Sashic-Carina's apartment block (there are no compartments there, just two huge halls in the basement), someone near the door recognized me in the flickering of the gas jet and called out for Sashic.

'There will be no trip to the village,' announced Sashic. The evacuation plans were canceled because Valyo had promised him places on board of a helicopter to Yerevan within a couple of days.

Their apartment block was not damaged in the last night bombardment except for lots of shattered windowpanes.

As for my family, there is no prospect of getting them on that helicopter. Valyo has got numerous and much closer relatives. Besides, with Roozahna packed off to her aunt's village, moving anywhere beyond this Republic is out of question.

And, it's a good luck she was not in the town when three GRAD volleys hit our block today.

The first hail exploded when I was on my way back from the downhill town and at a five-minute walk from our flat. Actually, I was passing by the Club and—when the volley was over—used my key to drop in for a piss. Then, I went to the epicenter.

The former Military Commissioner Building, now the *phedayee* headquarters, had lost half of its roof and two or three office rooms in the upper floor of its left wing. Two ambulances parked at the entrance turned into useless riddled tins—all chips and holes.

Phedayees were carrying armfuls of AK assault rifles from the damaged wing of the building to a nearby cottage. Obviously, no-one was killed. I caught a glimpse of a shell-shocked civilian youth rinsing his pallid face with the white snow, his thick-lipped mouth agape. All the street was littered with branches and twigs slashed off from the trees.

Lydia's house, opposite to the MC Building, was intact behind its locked gate. But the one-storied houses leaned against each other in a cluster down the street were almost falling apart, their walls furrowed with cracks and fissures.

Armen, my mate on the pipe insulation team of 5 at the gas pipeline construction firm, called out my name. He was in the khaki uniform now.

We entered the yard of the cracked up houses to shut the vent-cocks on the riddled gas pipes hissing with the leaking gas. Then, we went away.

Walking along the street, he picked up from the ground a huge pipe-like fragment of an exploded missile and asked me what it was made of. Then, probingly, he tap-tapped with the fragment on his hatless head. I asked him not to.

The second volley thundered an hour later. It hit the *phedayee* barracks (a former kindergarten) and the row of houses along the long and winding road I tread at my water-walks.

The third one exploded in the evening and caught me literally pants down, even more than that —stark naked—when I was taking a tub in the washing outhouse in the yard of our flat. The thin brick walls jiggled and quaked from the close explosions. The nearest one had blown up a house some twenty-meters from the washing hut. The furthest swept away the house wall-to-wall with the mother-in-law's one.

After rinsing the suds off and putting on my clothes (observing closely if the fingers were not trembling), I went up there to see whether Aram, my brother-in-law, was OK. The house door locked, all the panes smashed; Aram obviously was out at the time of the bombardment.

The Soviet regiment answered with their artillery. They say, there were casualties among the soldiers. Twenty-year-old boys not even being paid for getting killed.

All day long my family kept to the Underground. I shipped there both lunch and supper, ferried a mattress with a pillow, cut up and brought some wood for the tin stove from the supply stored at the mother-in-law's.

One page from Joyce translated. Yoga. (The slipped knee still pains, but what else do I have to do to pass the time?)

The water-walk is ahead after which this day-off will be over and succeeded by a (hopefully) good night.

February 24

Yesterday's water-walk turned into something weird and uncanny.

In all the streets and lanes along my water-trail there disappeared even those scanty windows lit with the ghostly shimmer of gas jet torches. The thickest fog imaginable and solid opaque darkness turned the way just invisible. I—with my eyes full open but seeing nothing—instinctively navigated amidst the familiar ruts, puddles and holes in the road and was gradually loosing touch with the reality and at some moment trespassed the borderline of an anti-Utopian dream where I plodded on along an endless way from nowhere-to-nowhere pulling at a juggernaut growlingly rolling after me. My "I" grew smaller and smaller in its dimensions and functions engulfed by this all-embracing darkness, and that diminished "i" was only feeling mechanical efforts of my body engaged in that plodding and hauling. I was taken out of myself, and it was strangely pleasant too. All thoughts and desires dried up. I didn't even want that endless road to be over or that going-pulling to be ended. It was like dissolution in Silence, Solitude, Freedom.

After breakfast the mother-in-law sent me to Carina with two breads she had baked the day before yesterday and with the oral message that both she and her house were all right with only window panes broken up.

The winter is still here. It snowed all night, and in the morning people were gathering the newly fallen snow from the streets into washing-tubs and pails to melt it and dodge their daily water-walks. The raw smell of pine tar from the hacked off branches hung all along Kirov Street.

Passing by the caved-in glass walls in the halls of the saving bank branch office and the nearby drug store, I spotted and pitied their interior pot-plants—the poor frost-bitten ficuses with their fleshy leaves turned brown, withered and warped.

Carina sent her old spare glasses for my mother-in-law who had lost hers.

At the Club two more women from the staff made flying visits to take home their belongings.

At five-minutes-to-twelve, Lenic dropped in on his way to the uphill town with the drawing of the coat-of-arms he had designed for the competition in progress. The creation presented a gloomy eagle with the sword and shield (the KGB motif?) and mountains in the background encircled by filleted wheat and grapes.

(…a real thing to be tattooed on any mobster's forearm…)

The picture was accomplished in an astoundingly meticulous and fine technique.

Nay, smoking is not so healthy a preoccupation as Lenic once happened to advertise it. Two-weeks ago, half a dozen men were killed when a missile exploded in a line of smokers queuing after raw tobacco leaves.

On finishing lunch I went uphill to help Aram in screening the windows in my mother-in-law's and his dwelling. He explained to me the trick by which the local detachment of the Soviet Army profits in the current war.

They are milking both sides: Armenians pay the regiment artillery to silence Azeri artillery while Azeries pay the regiment artillery to miss the targets. Aram steamed with indignation while exposing the unsavory cheat.

To change the subject too painful for my brother-in-law, I mentioned those poor plants—defenseless ficuses in the open.

'Man,' said he wryly, 'why to worry about them ficuses? They ain't laying no eggs neither for you nor for anybody else.'

The indisputable truth of his words left me dumbfounded. I shut up, we finished the repair-work, and I withdrew.

One page from Joyce translated.

During my yoga there was a GRAD hail, not too close though.

Supper.

The juggernaut's wheels are too small for so deep snow. Today, I'll just walk after water with a pair of pails to the "Suicide's Spring".

Just a thought: When you are not too delighted with some of your fellow human-beings, it does not necessarily mean you are a total misanthrope. I definitely like the drawing painted by Aram's daughter, Hasmic, as well as the way Ahshaut is handling his rubber ball.

In a word – Good night.

February 25

It's flaking off, it's snowing…

One massive hail of the GRAD missiles in the morning, followed up by a desultory firing random singles. But, after the first attack, my family was in the Underground, and I at the Club.

All the same over and over again: jiggling walls and quaking vinyl sheets in the windows of the Renderers' with the usual diuretic effect afterwards. ("Pissing when scared, ain't you?" was a cod-saying among my classmates at high school. Many a truth is said in jest. Close explosions do tell a number on my bladder.)

At eleven am Lenic dropped in on his way to the downhill town dragging along things from his flat to his father-in-law's. And he had decided to leave his draft coat of arms in the Renderers' room: the competition jury chairman was too busy to arrange an appointment.

Half-an-hour later Rita came in. That big shot of an Arcadic's pal pronounced the papers she had provided not valid enough to give her the evacuation pass-bill. There were explosions outdoors so she lingered until 12 o'clock to go out together with me. I saw her to the crossing by the Theater.

Then, I was engaged in shipping of cutlery and the warmed-up dinner to the Underground.

After lunch, one page from Joyce.

By the by, in the previous night's dream, I was reading a page from THE ARABIAN NIGHTS. The text, just as in this here reality, was printed in Armenian. It was one of the erotic fairy-tales wherein the protagonist, when emphatically depicting his sensations at the ejaculation, uses a purely Joycean antic—coining up a word of four doubled Armenian"Ձ"[dz]. It looked something like this: 'And then I felt ՁձՁձՁձՁձ'

After the aforesaid page from ULYSSES, I—a weak and sinful being—had a nap.

Getting up, I cooked the supper of unpeeled boiled potatoes, boiled a kettle of water, and took all that over to the Underground.

Yoga. Supper.

The water-walk's ahead.

Thanks to the outflux of the townsfolk, there are no constant queues at the most inconvenient water-heads (the "Suicide's Spring" with its 65 ice-coated steep steps is one of the kind).

The pawn-queue at the Three Taps was scrapped altogether and replaced with an alive one. Which is much shorter.

To make the long story short – Good night.

February 26

You get up in the morning feeling persistent pressure, knowing it will happen only that you can't tell when and where. And when the missiles commence to explode, you feel relieved: you can hear them, you've survived this time, and they will need about half-an-hour to recharge their Grad-installation. That's your measured ration of security.

Such a long preface instead of a short and clear-cut confession that today I quaked with my entire chest to a close explosion when sitting at ULYSSES translation. I wonder whether I would have jumped if standing.

Three massive volleys today and a good deal of shelling by singles—all unanswered.

At the Club only Lenic appeared to take away his draft coat-of-arms.

After the lunch I was sent to the downhill town with bread.

A pair of heavy trucks was passing the Upper-Round-Road by the Main Square, their dumps packed with bearded men. Everybody had a strip of dressing band tied up on the sleeve. Since the both warring sides use uniform of the same Soviet Army, they need some invention to distinguish "theirs" from "theirs."

The men seemed to be in high spirits issuing indiscernible yells from their rushing trucks. Are today's rumors about the capture of Hojalu true to life? Perhaps, here lies the explanation for so enraged bombardments of the last two days?

(…two or three victories more and nothing'll be left of this town…)

Sashic had a dressing on his finger. He and Carina were indirectly justifying his denouncement of his own proposal on evacuation by a detailed description of the hardships of village life. The labor lost. I am not blaming them nor anyone else, not even at the back of my mind.

Valyo was intact. A banquet of five males was in progress in their underground compartment brightly lit with a merry gas jet.

I sat at the table on his invitation but only drank a cup of tea. When going to leave I threw my coat over my shoulders, the supply of pens from the inside pocket spilled out onto the shingled ground. Sego, Valyo's sun, picked up and gave them back to me.

'So many!' remarked Valyo in surprise.

'Eight of them,' replied I, 'want some or any?'

He rejected and went out to see me off. Out in the yard, he asked if I/we/ours needed any food or money. I said nothing was needed but then asked him to find me a guitar if possible.

He looked a little baffled then started to explain me his standpoint concerning the evacuation. Either all or nobody should be saved. Consequently, one of these days he's gonna get a helicopter for all of his fifty-sixty kinsmen to fly away from down here and get at least a month's rest.

On my way back the first barrage of missiles exploded. The second one occurred when I was home at ULYSSES. It was followed up with beastly shrieks of a female in the street. However, it was not her who got wounded but her husband and fairly slightly too.

The third volley of the day took place during my yoga. This one set ablaze a number of two-storied wooden lodges for the regiment officers just outside the garrison wall.

On the women's prompting I found and fixed up an additional section to the outer part in the smoke-pipe from the Underground's woodburner.

Supper.

Once in a story by W. S. Maugham I ran across Joyce's collocation "infinite varieties". The fact doesn't exclude the possibility of Joyce borrowing it from Shakespeare who—in his turn—stole it from another guy.

My point is – Maugham angled the phrase bit from ULYSSES, you can bet on it.

The water-walk's ahead – Good night.

February 27

Yesterday, Orliana sent her mother a pint of cream. I did not know what was in the bag she asked me to deliver to my mother-in-law.

(…in Armenian, the word for cream has two meanings: firstly, "cream" and, secondly, "love" or, maybe, vice-versa…)

Uninformed about the contents of the bag, I hung the unknown love on a nail in the wall of our hall-aka-kitchen. Perhaps, that hanged love influenced my dreams and tonight I saw the girl who I had my first necking sessions with.

At the Club, Arcadic came to the Renderers' room. I asked for news, and he said that there was a cease-fire declared because Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs is coming to the region on a peace-making mission. About 12 am there also appeared Guegham, and I left them to each other.

At noon, on the basis of the news from Arcadic, I persuaded Sahtik to leave the Underground.

Lunch for two, because the mother-in-law went to the downhill town to see her daughters-with-their-families.

One page.

A walk with Sahtik and Ahshaut through a slow, serene, snowfall.

Yoga. Supper. Water-walk.

In times of peace there is almost nothing to write about, so – Good night.

February 28

In the morning I went to Rooshtic, Valyo's brother-in-law, who, according to the lead from Valyo, had a guitar.

Aye, the information was true to life but Rooshtic plays his guitar 25 hours a day. However, he promised to find some other one for me no later than March 4.

At the Club a minor VIP from the paper's staff paid a flying visit – the situation is surely getting better. Soon after, Arcadic appeared and asked about Rita.

One page after lunch.

Then Sahtik came home from the Underground (she doesn't trust in no truce), and took me over there to participate in providing their room with a gas jet. At that moment the gas pressure was frightfully weak, and I got scared that it would be cut off. So, on coming back home from the Underground, I boiled some water and washed up the dishes and then myself.

Scarcely had I commenced my yoga, when Sahtik came in with Ahshaut declaring that we had not had supper together for ages. Thus, today's yoga was sacrificed to the family gods.

Among the civilian Azeri prisoners captured in Hojalu, there was a pregnant woman. They brought her to the Hospital (presently in the basement of the Government Block—the former CPSU DC Building next to the Editorial House) where she gave birth to a twin of boys.

Arthur, the landlord's son, became an errand boy at the phedayee

headquarters; he told that today Hojalu was bombed with the GRAD missiles from the Azeri controlled Janhassan village – to spoil the lost. He also said that no looting was allowed in Hojalu so as to distribute houses there to those whose flats and belongings were destroyed by the bombardments.

(…"Hey, Robin Hood! Not only you were full of noble intentions!"..)

A few minutes ago, Sahtik brought Ahshaut home to wash up his bottom, today seems to be an all-out washing day. However, by now it is over.

The water-walk's ahead. Then there will be one more Good night.

P.S.: The truce, in fact, is over: right now I can hear din of a distant Grad bombardment of villages. The war goes on.

February 29

A day-off. In the morning one page from Joyce.

The mother-in-law baked breads and sent me to the downhill town. I made only a quarter of the way and then was stopped by Sashic honking from his car. He took responsibility for the bread delivery to both his wife and Orliana.

I took Sahtik and Ahshaut from the Underground for a walk. At the crossroads of Martuni Street and Upper Park Street, we had a quarrel. I proposed walking a few hundred meters farther up Martuni Street to have a wider view of the mountains, but Sahtik baulked fearing to get too far from the Underground. We bantered silly words back at each other. Then I stubbornly led Ahshaut on, she stayed behind.

On our way uphill, Ahshaut was delighted with a flock of white doves on the sidewalk. The keeper, a man in his prime, was feeding them on the sun-flooded sidewalk next to the columbary thrown together of roof-tin sheets. Ahshaut took to the birds at the first sight, calling them with the same word he uses to name the hens in the landlady's yard: "Coh-coh!"

The sun shone brightly making the road issue faint vapors thinning away in the dazzle. However, on the roadside there still remained patches of hard, granulated, snow. Ahshaut started to avidly scoop it and load—handful after handful—into the right pocket of his red coat (an unthinkable pleasure were his Ma nearby at the moment).

On our way back, I spotted Sahtik chatting with Lydia at the latter's gate. Getting a fresh audience in my person, Lydia once again mustered inventory of the things in their verandah perforated by fragments from a close Grad explosion. Then, she brought out from that same verandah a handful of candies for Ahshaut.

Her generosity brought to light the fact of his pocket being already filled up to the brim. The snow was thrown out. Ahshaut's protesting howl was pleasantly silenced with a piece of candy. I got it in the neck for standing by when he risked his dear health in that dirty awful snow.

(…real stoics are hammered out in marriage, you know…)

After lunch we had a nap: all three of us. There was no gas. Its absence gives me creepers of mortifying terror. All were trying to comfort and convince everybody else that the cut was caused by some maintenance work in the gas system. Well, this time it turned out to be something of the kind.

Sashic visited our place with his family, bringing fifty-kilos of potatoes as well. The local regiment of the Soviet Army was ordered to withdraw from the region. One of the officers—packing up for the pull-out—sold Sashic all his food supply and some pieces of furniture.

No yoga.

I played some of backgammon with Sahtik.

At supper there were four of us. Then I escorted them to the Underground. The gas jet down there lightens the room OK.

It was an absolutely peaceful day (except for our quarrel at the crossroads).

The water-walk's ahead.

I can think of nothing else to do but write – Good night.

Februa..

– No! March: it is now! So –

March 1

In the morning with the clumsy but robust wheelbarrow, I started from the Site to the woods and there cut out ten more poles for the Site fencing. Hauling the poles to the Site was a deadly toil. I got worn-out indeed: the sweat oozing through all the four layers of my clothing.

Valyo jumps to conclusions way too hurriedly because, returning from the Site, I saw in the street Edic the Plumber, a reputed cannabissmoker. He was neatly khakied and carried an AK, and a sheathed knife dangling from his leather belt. He was obviously as respectable a *phedayee* as one could wish and nothing of a burglar!

After lunch, the mother-in-law sent me to Carina with a cut-up hen from Carina's flock kept in her mother's yard. Recently, the fowl looked suspiciously sad and dull. They opted for slaying the bird before it would die on her own accord and be of no use. When it was safely slaughtered and ripped up, it came to light that the cause for her fatal listlessness was a choked intestine and not the pest. The creature's end was brought on by the incorrect diet.

In Carina-Sashic's underground there was a feast-in-progress. I sat at their table but drank only a cup of tea, in spite of Sashic's oration declaring spirits consumption the must in war times. However, in difference to the like affair in Valyo's underground, I partook of a blade of prickled herb followed by a piece of sugar.

On my way back, I met Edo, Valyo's cousin, the Director of the Computer Center, and asked him for a battery pack for my receiver.

(…I'm obviously turning into a brazen beggar…)

He promised to bring six batteries for me if his business trip to Moscow planned on for the end of this month goes without a hitch.

Then I met and had a talk with Mishic, the *phedayee* husband of Gaiana. He has evacuated her to the village together with their two-year-old daughter, and the unborn baby Gaiana is presently pregnant with. They live there in an old school house swarming with other refugees. Their apartment block here in the town was hit in a bombardment, but their flat, fortunately, survived.

At home I settled up with Nasic, the landlady, giving her the last twenty-fiver I possessed. It is only half-the-sum we pay monthly, but I've got no more money except three-monet-and-a-few-kopeck.

One page from Joyce. Yoga. Supper.

The day was sunny, at times a bit windy, under the feather-like streaks of high transparent clouds. Now, this first day of spring is over.

Sahtik, while washing Ahshaut in his plastic tub, wondered if we were to see the last day of this same spring. As far as I am concerned—come what may—death is by far more preferable than wounds, and if it is to happen, I insistently want to be the first from the family.

Till then – Good night.

March 2

During the night the local regiment of the Soviet Army fled from the town with their tanks, and odds and ends, setting, for a good-bye, the garrison barracks on fire. As the result, all the day fearful rumors were circulating among the undergrounders about Azeri paratroopers coming by helicopters and attacking the nearby villages.

At four am the mother-in-law came to knead the dough (bread baking is her personal medicine to suppress fears, I guess).

In the morning I went out after water. Where is the outward migration of the population I had been talking about? There were queues at every springhead.

The Club saw a flying visit of one more minor VIP in the newspaper staff. By the way, of all the enterprises in the town only the barber's near the Picture Gallery is presently working.

After lunch, the mother-in-law was not there, gone with breads to the downhill town; the three of us also went out and headed to the Orliana's.

Sahtik, for the first time, saw the destroyed Kirov Street, and said it was not as horrible as one could expect after her mother's accounts. Ahshaut thoughtfully gazed at the ruins of the photo-pavilion by the Central Park.

At the Lower-Round-Road, we met my mother-in-law coming back from her visitations to her daughters with a load of sugar and meat in her bag, as she proudly informed us.

In the basement corridor the two sisters kissed each other. There was a drinking dinner for males in progress. I sat at the table but ate nothing and drunk even less.

Leva, Valyo's loyal buddy, told a story about some youth who went to Hojalu for looting and brought back a pair of 16-kilogram weights for bodybuilding exercises.

(…a culturally promising looter!..)

Valyo and Sego went out to see us off. Valyo felt like fortune telling; his parting words were: "There are horrid things to come, I anticipate it." And he gave Ahshaut a good-bye kiss on his hand. Seems, like there's such a custom in these here latitudes.

When back at home, I carried the potatoes brought by Sashic to the mother-in-law's cellar. At our place the rats are too active by her estimation.

Then Leva, Valyo's pal, came by a Volga driven by the constant third participant in their drinking bouts. The driver, Leva and I hauled two milk-flasks full of water out from the Volga's trunk and took them over to our hall-aka-kitchen. One of the flasks was left there as a present for us from the generous Director of Milk Factory (Valyo) the second was to be emptied and taken back. The mother-in-law sent with them one more loaf of bread for Orliana.

One page from Joyce. Yoga.

I'm feeling not so well, seized by some inner chill.

After supper, I accompanied our family to the Underground.

They are real treats—these evening walks towards the Underground when Ahshaut is waddling along with his hand in mine, prattling, now and then, nobody knows what.

In the Underground's dark anteroom, an enthusiastic woman is every night performing a mutual prayer around a feeble candle. The congregation consists of a little and steadily diminishing flock of kid girls.

As for my prayer, it remains concise and clear – Good Night To All.

March 3

At the Club I was met by Shamir, the porter, who resumed attending his work place. About eleven pm, two or three members of the newspaper staff came to gossip and play chess.

My mother-in-law strongly doubts that the current bubble of peace will last long and uses the lull for bread baking. After lunch and a page from Joyce, I was sent to the downhill town.

Carina asked if in her mother's opinion they had nothing else to do but chew bread all day long. Orliana accepted it without comments.

Valyo informed me that his cousin Edo had left for Moscow.

The glass splinters from the smashed window-walls in the Department Store, that had been carpeting the adjacent sidewalk, are now accurately swept up into small hillocks. Gun-carrying men in the streets became more mature in age than a few months ago. In the garrison quarters of the withdrawn Soviet Army regiment, one more barrack was set on fire without a bombardment.

(…idiocy or pyromania?..)

I met Sashic, at the Lower-Round-Road. We had a maimed small talk of two male relatives having absolutely nothing to say to each other.

On my way back uphill, I shook hands with Mishic, nodded to Maxim, halloed Gago.

I returned just in time—it was the mother-in-law's turn to take water from a not too remote waterhead. (Sahtik and she were doing a general washing today.) For nearly two hours, I was bringing water, pails of it. The undertaking provided me an excuse for skipping my yoga today.

Awaiting bombardments grates on people much stronger than actual bombardments. The upsurge in the emigration eloquently proves the fact. The Underground became half-empty, and in their room down there Sahtik, Ahshaut and the mother-in-law are left to themselves.

Nasic, the landlady, attempted to send her three children to her native village. They went to an out-going road on the outskirts in the hope to flag down a passing vehicle. They saw not a single one and came back after a day of vain waiting on the roadside.

No water-walk today. Just – Good night.

March 4

In place of any guitar, Rooshtic presented me with another tall story about three strings torn off his guitar by his younger brother at a heated merrymaking. I humbly begged him to pardon me for the disturbance.

At the Club, the veteran—for whom all the doors in the Editorial House were to be kept permanently wide open—visited the former Renderers' (me). For a good half-hour, I listened to exposition of his views, complaints and criticisms—both global and private.

Near twelve am, Wagrum fluttered into the Renderers,' crisply-neat and freshly-shaven and powdered. He asked if I could provide him with a piece of paper to make a cigarette and matches to light it. The latter I had not. He shared his optimistic military-political forecast.

After lunch, one page from Joyce.

Sashic tapped at our communicational window to ask how we were doing. I complained of my futile efforts to find a guitar and asked for the address of his aunts who, as rumors had it, possessed one. Sashic promised to negotiate with them personally. An hour later, he triumphantly honked for me to go out and take "the gypsy toy".

For more than two hour, I was reconstructing it from being a Russian guitar of 7 strings into the international (Spanish) type. Finally, I went upstairs to tune it up by the dischordered piano of Nuneh, the landlady's elder daughter. Ahshaut was beside himself, hitting the roof and yelling at the top of his lungs, demanding the instrument into his possession.

No yoga.

After supper, I accompanied the three of them over to the Underground.

The water-walk is ahead. Reportedly, at the Three Taps nobody is allowed to fill more than six pails at a time.

(…rather a reasonable decision to my mind…)

A real springtime day it was—warm and sunny. And a good day deserves a Good night.

A fortnight more

March 5

In tonight dreams I wrestled with a student from that provincial Pedagogical Institute where I spent four years gambling and smoking cannabis. The bugger had been, as I later figured it out, a grass-root KGB informer just like any other mother's son, including me.

Dreams went on, and in the sequence parts I resisted three temptations: to steal a pile of nice flag-stones, to drink a glass of gin and to make love, that doesn't dare to call its name, with Armo, the landlord.

At the Club the chess-players from the editorial stuff gathered for their subtle preoccupation, but Lenic chose to visit me in the Renderers'. We had a long talk.

He hotly mustered the list of the offenses and injuries Azeries had inflicted to his compatriots since the Sumgait tragedy. In his harangue he freely used his store of printable curses.

I had to point out the importance of self control, especially for a representative of one's native intelligentsia.

(…the greater harm you inflict to someone, the bitterer is your hatred towards them…)

Lenic's attitude indicated there really had been a bloodbath in the captured Hojalu and the rumors of slaughtering war prisoners with knives must be true.

Phedayees will stop at nothing to drag all the Armenians into their boat. The image of eternal victims entertained by generations of Armenians has started to rub off revealing that of a pack of savage scalp-hunters—the very image they used to label Turks/Azeries with.

No wonder Lenic got baffled, and shocked, and horrified being pulled into an upside-down world he's not accustomed to. He has to provide a justification for Armenians. He has to find faults with Azeries, something like: "Those animals have made us turn brutes after all!"

He doesn't want to see that all of us are made of the same stuff and we differ only in family names.

(…by the way, I can't recollect a passage where Christ preaches patriotism of any kind.

Ergo: sing-a-song about one's holy native land is not Christian, neither in style nor in spirit…)

After lunch, the three of us took a walk for about an hour.

Then I did one page from Joyce.

Two hours of picking out old tunes on the guitar.

Yoga. Supper.

At our evening walk to the Underground, Ahshaut asked me where Roozahna was. Actually, he was repeating this very question every night on our way over there, but only today I—at long last—stumbled on the meaning of this particular piece in his prattling.

How could I possibly explain to a two-year-old kid his sister's evacuation?

The water walk is ahead.

Good night.

March 6

In the morning a roll of toilet paper slipped out of my hands and spun away unwinding its white band over the worn-out floorboards of our one-but-spacious-room flat.

Moxie voices and eager door claps sounded in the Club corridor: the commotion brought about by sugar- and flour-coupon distribution among the paper staff.

Lenic came at eleven more calm and restrained than yesterday. We just smalltalked.

In the afternoon, after Sahtik's tip that Nerses had come from the village, I visited him to ask for instructions about the two grape saplings I planted on the Site last autumn.

He shared his knowledge and wanted me to take from him one more vine shoot for planting. I declined, yet promised to come after it this very day next year.

'If only,' intervened Lydia, 'when speaking of the future never miss out on these words – "if only".'

I asked from her *THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO*. The abridged one-volume edition of *THE ARABIAN NIGHTS* I am in now is at its end.

One page from Joyce.

Recently, our intercourses with Sahtik have obtained, to my mind, some tinge of anti-war struggle. Well, today's action of protest was in the missionary position with Sahtik having the lead, which she does so nicely.

One hour of strumming the guitar—NORWEGIAN WOOD by John and Paul.

And, once again, returned the winter with an endlessly unwinding snowfall. The trees in the streets look like those in fairy-tale woods where even the tiniest twigs are dolled up in fluffy snowcoats of their own. Many of wounded limbs in the trees cannot withstand the slow flow of flakes unrolling from the low sky—they break off under the weight, drop down and get buried in the white expanses of snow, which is already no less than five inches deep.

Yoga. Supper. Water-walk.

From the north-eastern valley came sounds of the cannonade.

I saw the family over to the Underground.

One thing is ahead (if only) and it is a – Good night.

March 7

In the morning I went to the Site.

The White Silence. Das veschneit Märchenland.

Until twelve am, I was constructing a chute on the gorge slope for clay-tipping in the planned on lay-out toil.

The snow was falling all the day onto the slushy sidewalks and the streams of dirty water running down the roads.

And, all the day, a heavy cannonade was thundering in the direction of Askeran producing the all too well-known sickening feeling inside my belly.

After lunch, I did one page from Joyce.

Two hours of guitar-playing.

Ahshaut awoke after his day nap and played it too in a style of the future.

At six pm, instead of Yoga, I went uphill to Aram, my brother-in-law.

His mother, worried by his constant loneliness after his wife and children had flown to Yerevan, suggested me to invite him to our place. The invitation he declined expressly; so, to soften his solitude, I stayed with him playing backgammon for more than two hours.

Supper.

Escorted the family over to the Underground.

The water-walk is ahead and then the two-word prayer – "Good night".

March 8

Yesterday during my visit to Aram, our game was interrupted for a while by a visiting client who asked him to make a stock for his shotgun. Aram refused on the grounds of electricity absence.

This night in my dreams there was a

distribution of shotguns among the civilians yet no ammunition was handed out the distributors instructed the recipients to make the charges by themselves

(Maybe, this can account for those occasional shots in the streets every night? Are folks trying their home-made charges?)

then I was briskly striding along my childhood's backstreet—only the houses had become bigger —and a girl of ten was jogging behind me trying to keep up to my pace and at times she even managed to take over in short spurts and go ahead of me just to fall behind the next moment and each time when passing by she would look up at me but I couldn't make out her face

(…was that Liliana, my daughter by the second marriage?..)

In the morning the non-stop snowfall was still there. I cleaned the yard—half of it. Then Armo, the landlord, came downstairs demanding his share of the work.

I went uphill to Aram for another try at bringing him for lunch with us or at least to continue our game. The first item in the list of proposals was abruptly turned down, the second one magnanimously accepted.

After lunch, Sahtik, Ahshaut and I went out to loaf about in the park. The sun was peeping through the gaps in the clouds. Deep snow everywhere, about dozen inches deep, no less. Lots of branches got broken under the snow weight, some trees bent down submerging their tops in the snowbanks.

We met Samvel, the noble (i.e. non-looting) phedayee

, who said his wife Mila and the daughters had flown by a helicopter to MinVody.

By the way, I was informed that Valyo's cousin, Edo, had taken on that business trip to Moscow all of his family.

(…I'd better not keep my breath till he's back with the promised battery pack…)

One page from Joyce. The routine guitar-playing.

In the washing-hut I rinsed myself squatting in front of a pail on the floor and splashing handfuls of water up over me.

Yoga. Supper.

Now, Sahtik and Ahshaut went over to the Underground, however, just to visit her roommates down there.

She's going to stay home this night.

The water-walk is ahead and then, hopefully, a – Good night.

March 9

The night indeed turned out to be a really good one in its initial part unanimously dedicated to the anti-war action.

She is a superb first rater of this land, to pet her cuddliness even post-coitally is highly pleasurable and gratifying undertaking.

As for the dreams, they unfurled in a

...spacey gymnasium with polished floor neared in a smooth close-up bringing in view a row of hard chairs for the twenty accused among whom was also I and grown-up Chief and everybody knew there was just one punishment for those found guilty – decapitation… the case was tried and only two of us were acquitted – Chief and some unknown youth…

Perhaps, the grave dream was a reflection of Solzhenitsyn's ARCHIPELAGO in my dormant mind.

A lot of the staff members gathered at the Club. First, the coupon distribution is not over, besides, they hoped to get their salaries for the three concluding months of last year.

Rita came from a village, ten miles away from the town, where she lives by some remote relative of her relatives of her relatives.

Arcadic, Veelen and some others bobbed in and out of the Renderers'.

I lunched alone, Sahtik and Ahshaut on a visit to Carina, from where Ahshaut returned with three toys and two pairs of hand-me-down slippers too small already for his cousin Tiggo.

It was a day of flakes downing from the morning till night, melting in the way.

One page from Joyce. Guitar.

At supper Sahtik announced her intention to sleep in the Underground tonight because there she and Ahshaut share one bed and she has no problems with reaching for the kid when he wakes up.

I commended the current war for Hellenizing us: we live like in ancient Sparta where husbands and wives dwelt in separate barracks. So the war brings us to deeper comprehension of what is good and really convenient—a cellar is the most blissful place on Earth.

Yet, no sarcasm prevailed on her to change her mind—I had to see them to the Underground.

It's ten past nine pm.

Today's water-walk is feasible only with pails; however, one go would be enough – we're not short of water thanks to constant snowmelting and intense meltwater-trickling from all the housetops.

Good night.

March 10

"All we are saying is to give to peace a chance."

Sometime, somewhere we kept silent, and the chance was snatched by the war. Today, it had its say.

In the morning the mother-in-law was the first to come from the Underground. And she quite rightly criticized me for not covering the drinking-water pails with lids. So, I started for an early water-walk.

At the Club, a half-hour talk of purely literary nature with Lenic. Then, a medley talk with Rita.

When I came back home, barrage of GRAD bursts went pop somewhere out of the town.

Sahtik took it for *phedayees'* shelling of Shushi and in fear of Azeri retaliation she grabbed Ahshaut and set off for the Underground.

Soup for two, for the mother-in-law and me.

Sahtik, at her mother's suggestion, wrote a note to Orliana inviting her with the children to spend a couple of days in the Underground near our flat, which is safer than theirs. Being "Mr. Postman", I ran into Orliana by the Lower-Round-Road, a couple of hundred meters from her place. She was going to the uphill town to pay the last tribute to the deceased father-in-law of her brother-in-law.

(…in Armenian there are specific terms to cover any degree and shade of kinsmanship, each of those terms accounts even for the line and depth of interpersonal affinity…)

On reading the note, Orliana shook her head and said "no". These days wouldn't be too awful, intimated she, as long as *phedayees'* offensive at Shushi deferred for a month or so. Besides, the tendency for settling this here conflict by peaceful means grew quite prominent in the latest developments.

At that point a spray of GRAD missiles crashed smack in the middle of town and put emphatic period to her piece of oratory.

She ran back—down, I walked back—up the hill.

After the mother-in-law had baked breads, one more GRAD volley hit the town. I went downtown with the breads.

Again, desolate streets echoing to separate blasts. When I neared the Upper-Round-Road commonly named Piatachok, a random blast blew up a tree some thirty meters ahead of me.

Sashic was standing at the entrance door of their apartment block together with two other men. The Trinity was haloed with the common stink of mulberry hooch.

'Here comes my *bajanagh* (wife's sister's husband)!' announced he my coming to his partners. His finger was already clear of the dressing.

Then, I went to the Orliana's. When my mission was over, and I started back, Valyo solicitously called after me to be careful.

Yoga. Lonely supper. Water-walk.

The heavy snowfall going on and on all this day and night looked like Destiny's demand not loose the chance, take the ax and sledge, and go after that GRAD-felled tree in the round Piatachok square. The tin woodburner in the Underground needs firewood.

I did three treks.

Now, at these small hours, ain't it too late for "Good Night"?

March 11

Why did I do it? Well, as a rank-and-file-existentialist, I should (and did) conceive the shell cutting that tree in front of me as a test: How would I act under the circumstances? Would I just pass by or take part in the happening?

Exactly like ten years ago I had to make and made my choice and was arrested by the KGB for staging a wildcat sit-in at a state construction firm.

A workmen going on strike in a land ruled by the working class is an instance of sheer inconsistency. So, my case was an unquestionably medical one, and—perfectly logically—they locked me up in the madhouse.

Day after day I was lying on my back, stretched out in the shaded part of the walking-ground enclosure at the 5th Unit of the District Mental Hospital, with my eyes shut, trying not to think that an hour later they would come back with their syringe needles to make me wiser through my ass already turned into one bleeding sore by pricking it week after week no less than three times a day.

One day, I suddenly felt something dropped onto my stomach; I opened my eyes—it was a candy-kiss and no one nearby except for a couple of permanent inmates, of those submersed, past recall and return, into their respective inexplicable parallel worlds.

That also was an existentialistic test: what would I do to the untraceable candy? Well, I did just what you would do to any explicable sweets—I ate that candy from the blue.

(…yesterday's incident demanded my reaction, and I answered the challenge. But what if the shell-felled tree was a bribe from the war? And—accepting it—am I not a rotten collaborationist?

To hell! Whatever happens just has to happen; what's done has to have been done. And, as a reward, I received one more apocalyptic visual impression for my collection: that of the glassless blast-ridden rows of school-house windows stretching out in despare their slim white frames lashed by a ghostly pale blizzard piercing the pitch-black night....)

But, today, it was sunny: merry melting everywhere and glaring streams.

At the Club there was a usual exchange of casual remarks with the staff-members dropping into my room. (Gee! I called it 'my'!)

About twelve am, a *phedayee*-looking visitor appeared in search of paper to roll up a cigarette.

I gave him the paper issue dropped on the Wagrum's desk, dated last October, and then remembered that Wagrum was keeping it as his diploma piece, his masterpiece—a mock program of Azeri television.

After lunch, the mother-in-law sent me to see if they were selling the coupon-due flour at the Corner Shop.

The flour was on sale indeed though not in the shop but in the back yard providing the lee from a possible shelling. Some sixty men (elderly for the most part) and a dozen women crowded about. The feminine queue was much shorter.

(…all the queues down here except for those to water-heads are traditionally segregated according to queuers gender…)

The mother-in-law brought ten kilos of flour.

One page from Joyce.

Guitar-playing coincided with a prolonged GRAD volley detonating in the town. My mother-in-law was at that moment baking bread.

Yoga: my knee seems to be rebounding after the slip—the pain is not too acute, and the poses are nearing the norm.

The water-walk is ahead. Good night.

March 12

…I looked into the mirror-like glass and met a stare from the reflected young face of a longhaired gent with sleepswollen eyelids—should be me, eh?—the glass slided by and on entering the reception hall I was given the key to a fivestar suite which I found in a disgusting mess but I knew all too well it was me who had left it that way…

In the morning I went to the downhill town on the round of bread-calls with two loaf-tout cloth-bags.

On the way back, walking with a deliberate retardation (there was a whole hour until the Club opening time), I met Vladic, Valyo's brother. The first handshake of the day.

Idling on, I tried to find a peripatetic solution to that soul-in-transplanted-heart problem from THE BHAGAVAT-GITA's perspective.

Conclusions were grim enough: the donor's death empties his/her heart of both the soul and the Parathma while the recipient's soul/Parathma system is thrown away with the invalid heart. The operation results in a soulless being made up of flesh only—a kinda wholly organic robot.

(…if only THE BHAGAVAT-GITA was correct as to the location of soul in the human body. Or, if there does exist a thing conventionally called 'soul'…)

In the Main Square I entered the rounded terrace opposite the former CPSU DC Building and watched the distant snowclad mountains and the high pillar of smoke in the direction of Askeran. At night and all the morning, cannonade noise was rolling from down there.

The Club was locked. Shamir gone. I drew the duplicate key from my pocket and with calm pride opened the door. The staff members kept out of my room today, gossiping in the corridor.

I lunched alone and then went over to the Underground and brought Sahtik and Ahshaut home. I'd like them also see this sun shining gaily.

For Ahshaut's day nap, Sahtik took him back to the Underground under the mother's-in-law surveillance. Sahtik planned to visit the Main Post and get the allowance for Roozahna. I was to keep her company and meanwhile hanged on at the Underground's entrance. From that place I spotted Valyo who walked along the opposite sidewalk, obviously heading to our flat. I called out for him.

He crossed over and wished to have a look at this Underground. I served as a silent guide while he was sharing his impressions. (The place too crowded and dark and cold when compared to theirs, was his final conclusion).

Proceeding from the main corridor into the room he broke an encouraging news: the Azeri offensive against Askeran was repelled; *phedayees* captured four Azeri tanks and a GRAD installation.

Then we went out. Valyo parted with us at the nearest street-crossing. After receiving Roozahna's money Sahtik returned to the Underground.

One page from Joyce.

Sashic brought a sack of flour by his car. Gavo, a good neighbor of Sashic's, was helping to haul the sack from the car trunk to our hall-aka-kitchen.

Speaking to me on the present situation, Gavo explained that we live in a time of anarchy when there is no state protection—the former Big Brother provides us with nothing but lip-service TV news programs reporting how many GRAD missiles hit this town on the day.

So, to be on the safe side, Gavo calmly reasoned on, Armenians had to win this war, and they would.

During the hour of guitar playing there started a GRAD bombardment. The volleys were not full-charged, from five to ten missiles at a time, yet with a stepped up frequency.

I counted six such sprays to say nothing of single blasts and those by twos and threes.

The booming drumbeat continued well into the Yoga.

Supper.

Now, it's reletively calm except for occasional gunshots in the town.

The water-walk's ahead. Good night.

March 13

At yesterday's bombardment, seven people were killed in town, and I don't know how many wounded.

This morning in the Club I had to listen to a presentation on the current military-political situation in the region delivered by Arcadic in my (former Renderers') room.

'We are fighting harder than the enemy,' stated he, 'for we have no place to retreat.' Then, he dove into a potpourri from the history of the Armenian question and criticism of Azeri propaganda tricks.

(…if my approbation did not live up to his expectations let him next time look for a more responsive audience for his verbal diarrhea…)

After lunch, I went uphill to the mother-in-law's where I had transferred that blasted tree from the Upper-Round-Road. In her yard I sawed and chopped two thirds of the brought wood. The day was so bright and warm that I doffed to my shirt.

One page from Joyce.

Guitar. Ahshaut awoke and played it too. And he also participated in my Yoga making me a target for hurling his toys at. Equal levels (I was sitting on the floor then) widens communicational opportunities.

After they went over to the Underground, I had a supper and then Sahtik came back to wash the plates, but first we passionately protested against this here war.

She, by the way, wanted to know how to name the reverse of the missionary position.

Alas! There is a shameful gap in my education. Might it be—if one is allowed to make a guess—"the unconverted rider"?

And it's also a pity that the anti-war actions we are engaged in have to be mute – with Nasic/Armo's family and half a dozen of cellarless neighbors hanging on under our bed. The worn-out floorboards are too poor a soundproof. Poor us.

Then Sahtik washed up the dishes, I helped her drying them with a kitchen towel.

The water-walk looms ahead. Good night.

March 14

In the morning I went to the Site and till noon was fixing the chute for clay-tipping on the gorge's steep slope.

When going to the Site, I met another of my former colleagues from the gas pipeline firm—Camo, alias One-Monet-Per-Joke. Camo asked if I knew English well enough to explain the essence of the Armenian question to visitors from abroad.

'I could if properly paid for the job,' said I.

Then, he asked for how long I had been keeping my beard already and if I'd like him to present me with a razor. I thankfully declined his generous offer.

'But,' he said, 'if Azeries caught you they would surely take you for a *phedayee* and pluck off your beard hair-by-hair.'

'In such a case,' said I, 'let you give me your razor the moment they catch me.'

He contemplated the idea for a sec and refused.

When I was on my way back from the Site, GRAD shelling commenced. Now, bombardments are being performed another way, turned into a kind of suspended torture. Previously, when they were shooting by volleys, there was an interval of relaxation after each round of explosions—they

need some time to recharge, reasoned I. But presently they shoot no more than half-dozen missiles at a time. Then, the launcher's leveling is readjusted and you know not how soon or where the next portion would explode.

Under such unpredictable conditions running is simply senseless—one may run right into being on target for the follow-up blasts. These reasons make my gait so stately slow when not carrying the bread. Yet, when the explosions are too close, I'm ducking like any unreasonable runner.

After lunch, I went to the downhill town with the bread.

Sashic was unshaven and annoyed at me arrogantly walking the streets during bombardments.

Valyo was not at home – mobilized to the Republican Army as a skilled specialist; he had served in the Soviet Army artillery.

His buddy, Leva, went to have a word with the authorities. In his opinion this particular segment of population (the directors) should have nothing to do with the combat service. Leva himself is a deputy-director and utterly indignant about the precedent.

During one page from Joyce, the shelling renewed.

Guitar-playing.

I chopped and took to the Underground an armful of firewood for the tin stove.

Then, I played backgammon with Aram at his place and lost three monets to him.

Supper.

The water-walk's ahead.

The day was sunny and really pleasant. Good night.

March 15

In the morning, I paid Nasic, the landlady, our rent for the second-half of the month. That was Sahtik's or rather Roozahna's money; the last three monets I possessed were lost in the gambling with Aram.

I went to Lydia's after the subsequent volumes of ARCHIPELAGO. Yet, her subscription was cut off by the war. I thanked her and returned the initial volume.

Then I went to Aram to continue our game. I told him that I was flat broke and only had a handful of kopecks – he magnanimously decreased the stakes. After dramatic oscillations in luck we finished our game at noon almost in drought.

After lunch, one page from Joyce.

Guitar.

I tried to read Dumas-peré's *THE THREE MUSKETEERS* in Armenian for the sake of mastering the language. The dull preoccupation dumped me into the sin of daytime napping.

Then, Sahtik and Ahshaut came from the Underground; she did some washing, while he stayed in the yard with Nuneh, Nasic's elder daughter.

Yoga: when in the last asana, missiles began to explode and continued until the end of my supper that followed.

I felt some shiver in my fingers, watched them closely and saw they weren't actually trembling, however, I couldn't get rid of the feeling.

Now, it's calm; I decided on no water-walk today. All the pails and pots are filled up with the melt-water, which falls in innumerous springs and streams from each and every roof in the town.

The most widespread picture of today—pails on the sidewalks to catch dazzling showers of snow water a-glitter in the sun and the crowds of vellum-like washings on the cloth-lines sagged by the loundry weight.

As for the drinking-water, we have a pail-and-a-half of it. Besides, there is no vessel to go out with.

So, it was indeed a day-off. Good night.

March 16

In the morning a young giant visited me in the Club. He opened the door of my room, and had to bow when thrusting his head in to ask if it was the office of some unknown-to-me firm.

The paper folks recollected that there was some money (about three-thousand rubles) stashed in the editorial safe. The amount was too little to pay one-month salaries to all of the staff yet they quickly found a smart decision to divide the money into equal small sums of one-hundred-and-fifty each and distribute them among those members who would turn in time with the understanding that these sums would later be withhold from their regular payment.

The safe (kinda wardrobe made of sheet iron) today was cracked open with a bar-pick and they started the distribution.

Rita prompted me to go after my share. I obediently went to the indicated room and saw a woman in gray doling the money out. I had never seen her before. How many colleagues I don't know yet!

The cashier eyed me and said she was afraid it would be against the regulations to give me the money. Who knows how much I earned during these months?

I begged her pardon (bewildering her with so unpredictable a reaction) and left the room extremely proud with myself.

Rita was waiting in my room for Arcadic, who went to his big-shot buddy about the pass-bill for her to depart. Shamir, who had witnessed my encounter with the woman in gray, came into the Renderers' to express his consolation and to say that she was not right in his opinion.

A stout girl—just a match for that early basketball visitor—brought in the parliament decision typewritten in Armenian, declaring this newspaper from now on to be the government official organ called THE FREE ARTSAKH. A new newspaper for a newly independent state. However, they retained the old editor.

(…Boss! Where are you?.)

After lunch, I went to the Underground.

Rafic, the consort of the paper's queen in disguise, and his spouse herself, who was laid up in in the compartment after she had burned her leg with boiling water, were down there. I shared to them the smashing news.

One page from Joyce. Guitar playing.

Sometime after five pm, there were several separate bursts in the town. Cannon shell explosions.

Yoga. Supper.

The water-walk of two goes is ahead. Good night.

March 17

At seven in the morning, a GRAD attack.

I was out in the yard squatting in the privy and couldn't see, but visualized vividly enough, how Sahtik was grabbing Ahshaut into her arms and running over to the Underground. The mother-in-law didn't run away; she was making dough.

Nearing the Club, I saw that the most of its windows were broken. The next-door building, former-CPSU-DC-now-Hospital, had been hit by a missile. As it exploded on the uppermost floor, there were no casualties, I guess.

Lenic came with a story about a hideous shell splinter flashing a hair's-breadth off over his head this morning when he went to a water-spring and was caught by a bombardment on his way. Then he asked if it's true they were giving some money here. I explained their scheme. And when the woman-in-gray came, he was given his share.

Rita came with her complaints about untrustworthiness of Arcadic's pal in the government; I told her to go to the airport at Hojalu where planes from Armenia were flying to-and-fro daily, and where one needed neither pass nor other papers – just 150-monets, the fare-fee to Yerevan.

About twelve am, I took a broom from the corridor and started to sweep windowsills and the floor in the room gathering glass splinters of the shattered panes onto a piece of a cardboard. Rita found another broom and started to help me.

Shamir, the porter, with wine on his breath, was cursing the janitor-woman, who never comes to do her job these days, his invective was accompanied with his fierce hammering at the corridor window to cross-bar it with the boards he had stolen from the ground floor windows in the former-CPSU-DC-now-Hospital Block.

There was no streaming nor trickling nor dripping from the roofs, no streams ran down the roads. The snow's over.

Leaving for the Club in the morning I wore no hat and instead of my coat, I put on the sturdy jacket Sahtik made for me 2 years ago On my way back, I decided to visit the Underground first.

Sahtik and Ahshaut were in the block's yard. We, Ahshaut and I, smiled to each other, and at that very moment the day's second volley of missiles started to blast. Sahtik snatched him up and ran down to the Underground. I followed them. The explosions sounded fairly close.

Panic-stricken voices sounded in the darkness of the corridor. In the compartment there stood a woman upright and still as if petrified by fear for both her husband and grown-up daughter, who were somewhere in the town and not by her side.

Sahtik tried to calm her down by assuring that the missiles hit an absolutely other place, some place where they could never possibly be.

When the bombardment subsided the mother-in-law sent me to see if Aram was all right. Yes, he was.

After lunch, one page from Joyce. Guitar. Duma-peré.

Sahtik has finished the pullover she was knitting for me all this winter. She's just a

March 18

"She's just a treasure" was my intention to write yesterday, but the pen had run out of all its ink or paste or whatever it had been writing with. Nevertheless, I'm ready to repeat it even today – she's just a treasure!

It seems to be the last entry in my diary. This blocknote is finished, and at the barber's—the only working enterprise in the town—they sell no notebooks.

Thus, the time has come for winding up. Anyhow, one shall draw a line somewhere. Well, I'm fully aware that these notes o' mine have a hell of misgrammings and missspellings. They are dull. They are monotonous: Yoga. Guitar. Supper. Good Night. Good Night. Good Night. Good Night.........

But! For three-months, they were my shelter and outlet for my horror, frights and sentimentality. The point is so evident, it doesn't need any further exposing.

On the other hand, there is some other thing I cannot prove but may suppose. Chaadaeff, a seminal Russian thinker of the XIX century, prophetized fusion of this world made up of countless individual minds into the world of One Mutual Mind. He called it "the Kingdom of God".

Academician Vernadsky, already in the current century, announced that not only biosphere, lithosphere and so on exist on this planet, but also one more, let's call it noosphere. It's like a common pool of human minds and thoughts and ideas to which all of us are contributors (…he seems to pick up the idea from the contemporary French Jesuit monk, overly obedient to the orders of his bosses…)

Some twenty-years after him, THE BEATLES sang: "All we're saying is to give to peace chance." I would add – all we are thinking, crooning, all we are doing (if not as a part of the war effort) is to give to peace/world a chance. In this respect, these writings were also a part of the anti-war activity in the very epicenter (one of too many) of hatred, killings, suffering of the noosphere contributors, who are chewing ancient cud about native land or sacred vengeance.

All False. "Native land" is a rattle-toy for paupers and imbeciles. I have been to various lands (within the former Soviet Empire): any of them may become your beloved, if you are able to love. And, if my Treasure or our kids get killed or maimed, no mountains of corpses, no seas of blood would ever repair the loss.

Aye, Coleridge said: "sweet is the vengeance", but it's true only for ravens, not for the contributors. However, all that is my suppositions only, for which I've got neither tangible prove, nor undeniable evidence. So it's high time for me to drop this sermon and go over to more common sense matters.

During the night, the town was bombarded with missiles—the noise in the streets awakened me from time to time.

In the morning I went to Carina's underground with the bread baked by her mother. Carina was glad to get it. She said, that tomorrow is her daughter Rita's birthday.

In the Orliana's underground I was told that she together with her children had flown by a plane to Yerevan. Valyo remains here as a GI.

At the Club, there were almost no visitors today. Only Rafic and another member of the staff, to whom the news about money distribution came too late.

After lunch—guitar-playing with near-by blasts of a GRAD volley.

Yoga—with near-by blasts of another GRAD volley.

Then, I went to the Underground to keep Ahshaut in my lap for a while. At my knocking on the room's door, he opened it and distinctly cried in Armenian: "Daddy has come!"

I hope he won't be a stale thoughts chewer, but become a real contributor in any language he chooses. The lingua makes no difference. In the end Ahshaut will find his contributions as wanting and incomplete as bibles, qorans, vedas, relativity theory or any other holy scriptures from all of the pack. Anyway, it is Ahshaut's future, his problem. And, I have my problem—my present to cope with. Jedem – seiner.

Sahtik began to knit a sweater for Gaia, the daughter of Orliana.

After the visit to the Underground, I returned home and ate supper cooked by my mother-in-law.

The water-walk of two goes is ahead.

GOOD NIGHT